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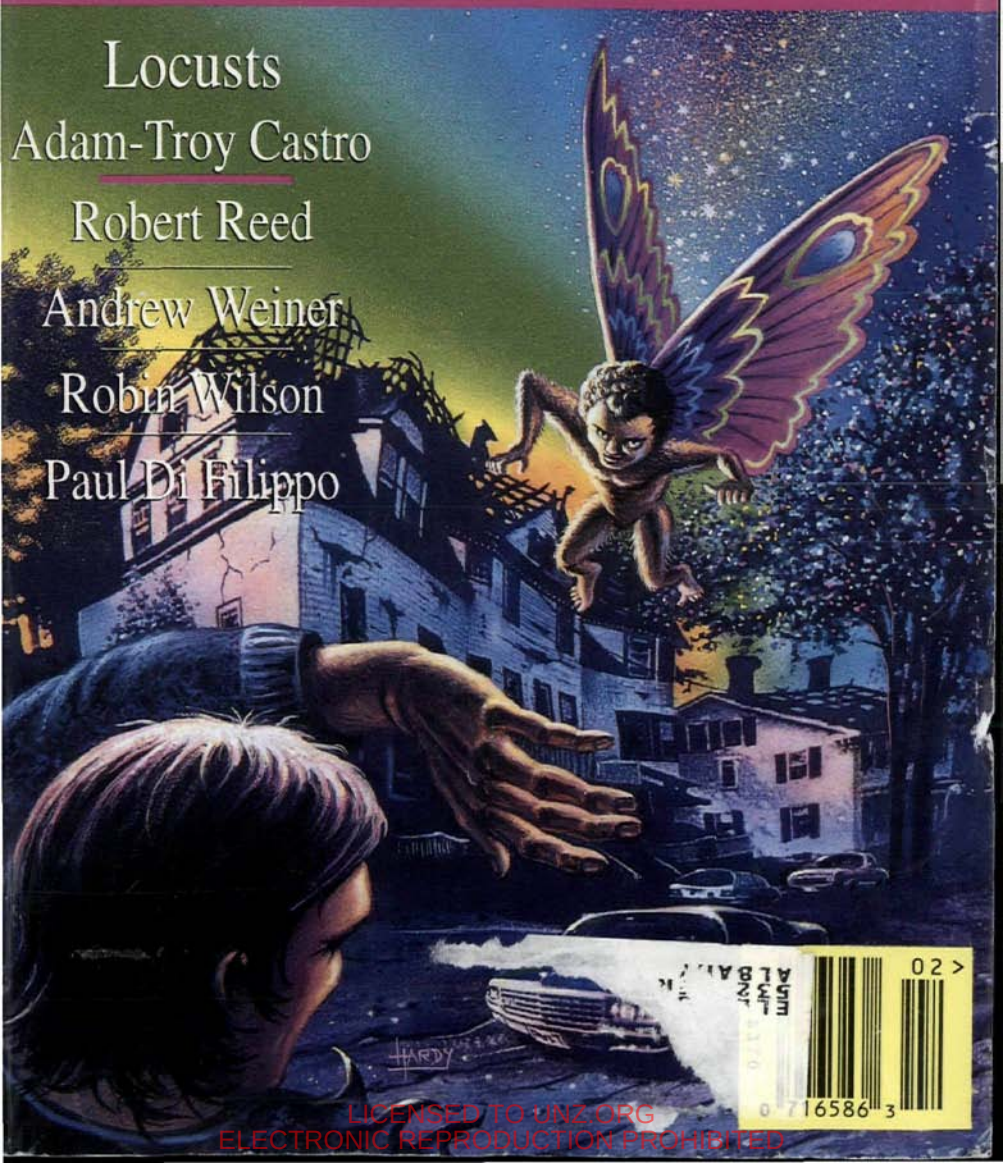

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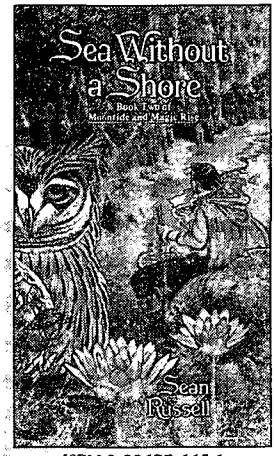

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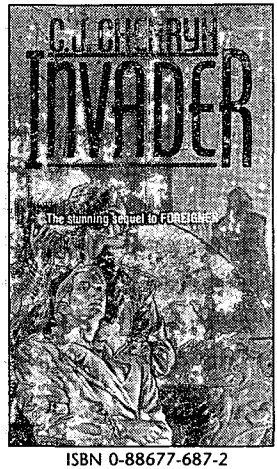

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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FEBRUARY • 47th Year of Publication

NOVELET

LOCUSTS 133 Adam-Troy Castro

SHORT STORIES

FIRST TUESDAY 11 Robert Reed
CONNECTICUT NAZI 41 Ron Savage
SWAMP WATER 54 Lynn Coulter
SACRIFICE 64 Avram Davidson
PERMANENT NATURAL BOY 66 Laurel Winter
THE PURPLE PILL 83 Andrew Weiner
EVERY DAY DIFFERENT 109 Robert J. Levy
THE UNMARKED CROSSING 119 J. Steven York
THE RETIRED MEN'S SOCIAL CLUB & LADIES' AUXILIARY 122 Robin Wilson

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS 28 Robert K. J. Killheffer
BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 35 Charles de Lint
BRIEF REVIEWS: BOOKS 39
PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS 79 Paul Di Filippo
SCIENCE: LANGUAGE: THE MOST POWERFUL DRUG 100 Janet Asimov

CARTOONS: Bill Long (10); Mark Heath (34); Charles Almon (53); Joseph Farris (63); Henry Martin (132).
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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I HAVE planned to write this editorial ever since I noted the predominance of science fiction in the fall television line-up. New science fiction shows in such large numbers, I figured, were worth a nod. I saved the actual writing until October, while my husband and I were moving into our new house. We bought a "fixer-upper" and we've been fixing up. (For the past two weeks, I have gone to the local diner with paint splattered in my hair. And on my jeans. And my glasses. And, and, and.) I organized my schedule carefully so that I wouldn't have to read for the magazine during October, and I would only have to do minimal work to finish this issue. I figured that I would be so tired from fixing upping that I would relish watching television at night.

Wrong.

I forgot that painting, spackling and hauling is much harder work than writing and reading. I've been toppling into bed at earlier and earlier hours, sleeping like the dead, and awaking stiff and sore. So instead of watching, I've been taping. Then, when I'm waiting for paint to dry (literally) or am too tired to work but unable to sleep, I watch.

I had hoped to see all of the new fall science fiction programming, but I managed to miss a few shows. Some didn't interest me; some, in my exhaustion, I taped over; some I simply forgot. I also found myself making choices that I wouldn't have made if I were trying to watch everything as it aired. I will discuss those choices below.

But before I do, let me discuss my viewing habits. I watch a fair amount of television. It is a good way to relax after a day of reading and writing. I also watch a lot when I'm doing artsy things or repetitive work. I will sample many programs, but I never watch anything I don't like. I am an inveterate *TV Guide* reader, and I always use the entertainment section of the paper to keep track of trends. So, even if I fail to watch a show, I can usually tell you what the buzz is about it.

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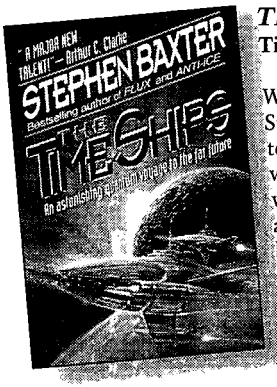
A MAJOR NEW TALENT! — Arthur C. Clarke
STEPHEN BAXTER
Bestselling author of FLUX and ANTI-ICE
THE TIME SHIPS
An astonishing sf adventure set in the far future

THE TIME SHIPS Stephen Baxter

Time is not on your side.

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THUNDERSCAPE: THE SENTINEL Dixie Lee McKeone

Let the games begin.

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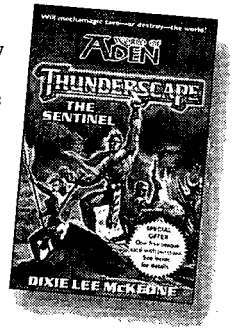

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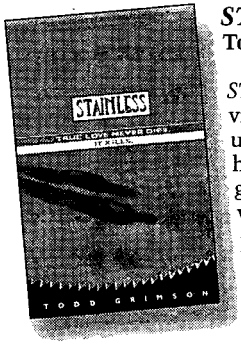

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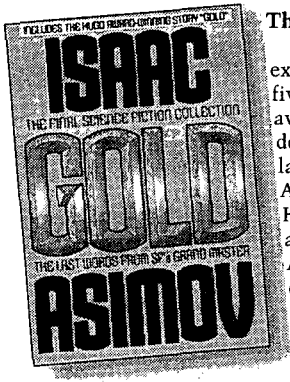
GOLD Isaac Asimov



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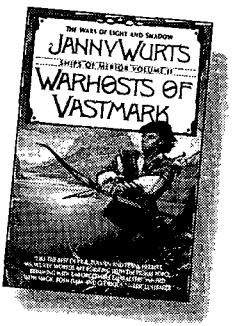
WARHOSTS OF VASTMARK: Ships of Merior Volume II
Janny Wurts



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In the past she has been compared to Tolkien and Herbert, but in her latest fantasy epic, multiple World Fantasy Award-winner Janny Wurts defies all comparisons. Is it any wonder that her writing has been called "powerful, gritty fantasy at its very best?" In this spellbinding tale of a prophecy come true, two princely brothers, locked in deadly conflict, fight the final battle of good and evil. *The Wars of Light and Shadow* sequence continues with this second volume of *Ships of Merior*. It's more than an epic adventure...it's a primal read!

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ALIEN ISLAND: A SPACE PRECINCT NOVEL David Bischoff

A TV tie-in that's out of this world.

Police work is out of this world in *ALIEN ISLAND*, the third novel in Gerry Anderson's *Space Precinct* series based on the sensational new TV show. It's like *NYPD Blue* meets *Star Trek* with a little *RoboCop* thrown in for good "destructive" measure. Demeter City is the crime capital of the galaxy but it's never seen a crime wave like this before. Is an alien serial killer stalking the streets? Or is it an angel gone bad? Brogan gets a hot new lady partner to help him find out.

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Fences, and will give anything David Kelley signs his name to a chance. I was a big *Northern Exposure* fan when the show was whimsical and inventive, but I tuned out when whimsical turned to bitter, and the show became a pale imitation of itself. I have been a closet Trekker since I was twelve, and only miss *Deep Space Nine* or *Voyager* when the VCR is broken. My husband and I watch *X-Files* together and have made a pact (after that sewer episode) not to watch the show during dinner or just before bed. I adore *Lois and Clark* (mostly because of [sigh] Dean Cain), and love *Forever Knight* when it successfully combines vampire angst with urban danger. I coerce my friends into watching *Cybill*, never miss *Dave's World*, and always try to catch the end credits of *Roseanne*. I almost always see movies in the theater, and usually avoid Made-For-TV fare (mostly because two hours seems like a huge time commitment). Late nights, I usually watch Letterman, channel surf to Leno, and scan the promos for *Nightline* just in case. I am a CNN junkie and often thank the heavens and Ted Turner for Headline News.

When it came time to tape all the new fall shows, I got overnormally would have given it two. *Nowhere Man* (UPN) lost me when it became clear that I could predict the end of every episode by applying *The Prisoner*-style paranoia. *Space: Above and Beyond* (Fox) never looked appealing and, even though I taped the two-hour premiere, I never watched it (and, I believe, taped over it just after the move). People tell me I am missing something pretty special.

The show I was the most excited about, from the write-ups, was *American Gothic*. I adore gothics, and love creative atmospheric programming. The first episode was wonderful. The show has a delightful sense of humor mixed in with the foreboding, the sets are creepy, and the writing is top-notch. The show required a great deal of concentration to watch, and was as frightening, if not more frightening, than the *X-Files*. I taped three more episodes.

And didn't watch them.

Oh, I had time. But I was tired and didn't want to concentrate that hard. Or I was about to go to bed, and didn't want to be scared. I asked my husband how he felt about the show, and he said it was too intense for him. Ultimately, he was right. It proved too intense for me, too.

I like intensity in fiction and in

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film, but on a weekly basis, revisiting the same scary town with evil incarnate roaming the streets, seemed a bit much. *American Gothic* is like *Twin Peaks* in this way: the acting and writing are strong; the characterization is intriguing, and the setting is well done, but the show feels intellectually bankrupt. Maybe I've read too many gothics, and so the form holds little new for me. Or maybe the first episode rattled me so badly I'm making excuses for not tuning in again. I'm not sure. What I do know is that, while I will recommend *American Gothic* on the basis of that episode, I probably will not watch it again.

The science fiction and fantasy program that I will recommend whole-heartedly and do not miss is *Strange Luck*. *Strange Luck* is the ongoing story of Chance Harper, a man who is "lucky." Coincidences abound in his life. Sometimes his luck is good; sometimes it is bad, but everything that happens to him happens for a reason. D.B. Sweeney stars as Harper, and he has the right amount of world-weariness to pull off the role. Frances Fisher, as the waitress who knows about his luck, also adds to the program. Only Pamela Gidley, who plays Harper's boss and occasional girlfriend, doesn't seem up to the task.

I must admit, though, part of the charm of *Strange Luck* (for me) is the writing. Fiction normally cannot rely on too many coincidences. Coincidences ruin the suspension of disbelief. But *Strange Luck*'s premise requires coincidence. The challenge, then, for the writers, is to stay ahead of the viewer, to make the coincidences seem unrelated, or unpredictable, until the episode's end.

So far, the writers have pulled that feat off. It helps that real science fiction writers have penned screenplays for the show. *F&SF* regular Michael Cassutt is a co-executive producer for the series. He and novelist Melinda Snodgrass have both written episodes. (I didn't know that Michael was involved until I saw the second episode—I'm embarrassed to say I hadn't noticed his name on the credits until then.) Sf shows which hire real sf writers always seem to have a cohesiveness and a subtle creativity that other shows lack: *Babylon Five* and *Outer Limits* (depending, of course, on the writer) are cases in point. *Strange Luck* has my vote for best new sf show of the season.

So, instead of a scientific, no-holds barred review of the new crop of sf, I give you an idiosyncratic glimpse at the season. My idiosyncratic glimpse is probably more reflective of viewing habits anyway. By the time you read this, the fall schedule will have been turned upside down, inside out, and backwards, *TV*

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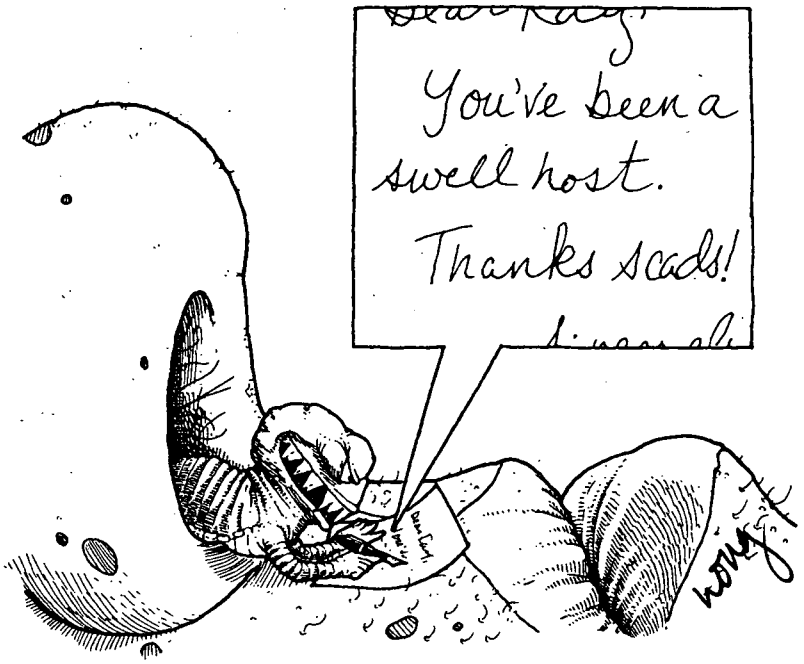
Guide will be analyzing the mid-season replacements, and we will know if the so-call sci-fi invasion resulted in a revolution or a skirmish.

Ultimately, I am pleased that television is supporting science fiction. I find the attempts, successful or not, exciting. I hope that the success rate of these new shows (and the old ones too) is high enough to warrant more sf/f programming in the future. Television, whether we like it or not, touches all of our lives. It would be nice if more and more people were as touched by science fiction as they are by, say, medical dramas, cop shows, or coffee-drinking situation comedies.

Besides, I would rather have too much to watch than too little. Real choice saves me from watching yet another half hour of Headline News when painting, spackling, and hauling have left me too tired to stand. ☙

THE PROPER LITTLE PARASITE



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It seems as if the 1992 elections just ended, and yet this magazine arrives in your mailbox at the beginning of primary season. So, with politics on our minds, we searched for some appropriate stories.

Political science fiction is often about the ramifications of social change. Rarely does the political sf story (these days) begin with a point of technological change. In "First Tuesday," Robert Reed uses a change in technology to examine the future of Presidential-Constituent relations.

First Tuesday

By Robert Reed

AFTER A LOT OF PESTERING, Mom told Stefan, "Fine, you can pick the view." Only it wasn't an easy job, and Stefan enjoyed it even more than he'd hoped. Standing on the foam-rock patio, he spoke to the house computer, asking for the Grand Canyon, then Hawaii's coast, then Denali. He saw each from many vantage points, never satisfied and never sure why not. Then he tried Mount Rushmore, which was better. Except Yancy saw the six stone heads, and he stuck his head out long enough to say, "Change it. Now." No debate; no place for compromise. Stefan settled on the Grand Canyon, on a popular view from the North Rim, telling himself that it was lovely and appropriate, and he hoped their guest would approve, and how soon would he be here...? In another couple seconds, Stefan realized. *Jesus, now...!*

A figure appeared on the little lawn. He was tall, wearing a fancy suit, that famous face smiling straight at Stefan. And the boy jumped into the house, shouting with glee:

"The President's here!"

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His stepfather muttered something.

Mom whined, "Oh, but I'm not ready."

Stefan was ready. He ran across the patio, leaping where it ended. His habit was to roll down the worn grassy slope. But he was wearing good clothes, and this evening was full of civic responsibilities. Landing with both feet solidly under him, he tried very hard to look like the most perfect citizen possible.

The President appeared solid. Not real, but nearly so.

The face was a mixture of Latin and African genes. The dreadlocks were long enough to kiss his broad shoulders. Halfway through his second term, President Perez was the only president that Stefan could remember, and even though this was just a projection, an interactive holo generated by machines...it was still an honor to have him here, and Stefan felt special, and for more reasons than he could count, he was nervous. In good ways, and in bad ways too.

"Hello?" chirped the eleven-year-old boy. "Mr. President?"

The projection hadn't moved. The house computer was wrestling with its instructions, fashioning a personality within its finite capacity. There was a sound, a sudden "Sssss" generated by speakers hidden in the squidskin fence and sky. The projection opened its mouth; a friendly, reedy voice managed, "Sssstefan." Then the President moved, offering both hands while saying, "Hello, young man. I'm so very glad to meet you."

Of course he knew Stefan's name. The personality could read the boy's public files. Yet the simple trick impressed him, and in response he shouted, "I'm glad to meet *you*, Mr. President."

The brown hands had no substance, yet they couldn't have acted more real. Gripping Stefan's pale little hand, they matched every motion, the warmth carried by the bright eyes and his words. "This is an historic moment, Stefan. But then you already know that, I'm sure."

The first nationwide press conference, yes. Democracy and science joined in a perfect marriage. President Perez was invited here for a symbolic dinner, and he was everywhere else at the same time. It was a wondrous evening...magical...!

"A lovely yard," said the President. The eyes were blind, but the personality had access to the security cameras, building appropriate images as the face moved. With a faraway gaze, he announced, "I do like your choice of view."

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"Thank you, Mr. President."

"Very nice indeed...!"

Holo projectors and squidskin fabrics created the illusion of blue skies and rugged geology. Although nothing was quite as bright as it would appear in the real outdoors, of course. And the squidskin rocks and the occasional bird had a vagueness, a dreamy imprecision, that was the mark of a less-than-good system. Sometimes, like now, the antinoise generators failed to hide unwanted sounds. Somewhere beyond the President, neighbors were applauding, and cheering, making it seem as if ghosts inhabited the ghostly canyon.

President Perez seemed oblivious to the imperfections. Gesturing at their garden, he said, "Oh, I see you're doing your part. How close are you to self-sufficiency?"

Not close at all, really.

"Beautiful eggplants," said the guest, not waiting for a response. "And a fish pond too!"

Without fish. A problem with the filter, but the boy said nothing, hoping nothing would be noticed.

The President was turning in a circle, hunting for something else to compliment. For some reason, the house wasn't wearing its usual coat of projected paints and architectural flourishes. Their guest was too complicated, no doubt. Too many calculations, plus the computer had to show the Grand Canyon...and the real house lay exposed in all its drabness. Glass foams and cardboard looked gray and simple, and insubstantial, three walls inside the yard and the fourth wall pointed toward the outdoors, the brown stains on the sky showing where rainwater had damaged the squidskin.

To break the silence, Stefan blurted out a question. "Mr. President, where do you stand on the economy?"

That's how reporters asked questions.

But the great man didn't respond in the expected way. His smile changed, remaining a smile but encompassing some new, subtly different flavor of light. "I'll stand on the economy's head," he replied. "With my feet apart, ready for anything."

Was that a genuine answer?

Stefan wasn't sure.

Then the President knelt, putting his head below the boy's, saying with a happy, self-assured voice, "Thank you for the question. And remember,

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what happens tonight goes both ways. You can learn what I'm thinking, and in a different way I'll learn what's on your mind."

Stefan nodded, well aware of the principles.

"When I wake," said the handsome brown face, "I'll read that this many people asked about the economy, and how they asked it, and what they think we should be doing. All that in an abbreviated form, of course. A person in my position needs a lot of abbreviations, I'm afraid."

"Yes, sir." Stefan waited for a moment, then blurted, "I think you're doing a good job with the economy, sir. I really do."

"Well," said the guest, "I'm very, very glad to hear it. I am."

At that moment, the genuine President Perez was inside a government hospital, in a fetal position, suspended within a gelatin bath. Masses of bright new optical cable were attached to his brain and fingers, mouth and anus, linking him directly with the Net. Everything that he knew and believed was being blended with his physical self, all elements reduced to a series of numbers, then enlarged into a nationwide presence. Every household with an adequate projection system and memory was being visited, as were public buildings and parks, stadiums and VA facilities. If it was a success, press conferences would become a monthly event. Political opponents were upset, complaining that this was like one enormous commercial for Perez; but this was the President's last term, and it was an experiment, and even Stefan understood that these tricks were becoming cheaper and more widespread every day.

In the future, perhaps by the next election, each political party would be able to send its candidates to the voters' homes.

What could be more fair? thought the boy.

Stefan's stepfather had just stepped from the drab house, carrying a plate full of raw pink burgers.

In an instant, the air seemed close and thick.

"Mr. Thatcher," said the projection, "thank you for inviting me. I hope you're having a pleasant evening...!"

"Hey, I hope you like meat," Yancy called out. "In this family, we're carnivores!"

Stefan felt a sudden and precise terror.

But the President didn't hesitate, gesturing at the buffalo-augmented soy patties. Saying, "I hope you saved one for me."

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"Sure, Mr. President. Sure."

For as long as Stefan could remember, his stepfather had never missed a chance to say something ugly about President Perez. But Mom had made him promise to be on his best behavior. Not once, but on several occasions. "I don't want to be embarrassed," she had told him, using the same tone she'd use when trying to make Stefan behave. "I want him to enjoy himself, at least this once. Will you please just help me?"

Yancy Thatcher was even paler than his stepson. Blonde hair worn in a short, manly ponytail; a round face wearing a perpetually sour expression. He wasn't large, but he acted large. He spoke with a deep, booming voice, and he carried himself as if endowed with a dangerous strength. Like now. Coming down the slope, he was walking straight toward their guest. The President was offering both hands, in his trademark fashion. But no hand was offered to him, and the projection retreated, saying, "Excuse me," while deftly stepping out of the way.

"You're excused," Yancy replied, laughing in a low, unamused fashion. Never breaking stride.

Mom wasn't watching; that's why he was acting this way.

Things worsened when Yancy looked over his shoulder, announcing, "I didn't want you coming tonight, frankly. But the kid's supposed to do an assignment for school, and besides, I figured this was my chance to show you my mind. If you know what I mean...."

President Perez nodded, dreadlocks bouncing. "Feedback is the idea. As I was just telling Stefan — "

"I'm an old-fashioned white man, Mr. President."

The boy looked at the drab house, willing Mom to appear.

But she didn't, and Yancy flung open the grill and let the biogas run too long before he made a spark, a soft blue explosion causing Stefan to back away. Nobody spoke. Every eye, seeing or blind, watched the patties hit the warming rack, sizzling quietly but with anger, Yancy mashing them flat with the grimy spatula that he'd gotten for Christmas last year.

Then the President spoke, ignoring that last comment.

"It's a shame this technology won't let me help you," he declared, with a ring of honesty.

Yancy grimaced.

The patties grew louder, the flames turning yellow.

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Obstinately ignoring the tensions, the President looked at his own hands. "A poverty of physicality," he declared, laughing to himself.

That was it. Something snapped, and Yancy barked, "Know what I like, Mr. President? About tonight, I mean."

"What do you like?"

"Thinking that the real you is buried in goo, a big fat glass rope stuck up your ass."

Stefan prayed for a systems failure, or better, a war. Anything that would stop events here. His fear of fears was that the President would awaken to learn that Yancy Thatcher of Fort Wayne, Indiana had insulted him. Because the boy couldn't imagine anyone else in the country having the stupid courage to say such an awful thing.

Yet their guest wasn't visibly angry. He actually laughed, quietly and calmly. And all he said was, "Thank you for your honesty, sir."

Yancy flipped burgers, then looked at Stefan. "Tell your mom it'll be a few minutes. And take *him* with you."

It was such a strange, wondrous moment.

The boy looked at his President, at his smile, hearing the conjured voice saying, "Yes. That's a fine idea." Built of light and thought, he seemed invulnerable to every slight, every unkind word.

Stefan had never envied anyone so much in his life.

MOM WAS A BLIZZARD of activity, hands blurring as they tried to assemble a fancy salad from ingredients grown in the garden, then cleaned and cut into delicate, artful shapes. She loved salads, planning each with an artist's sensibilities, which to Mom meant that she could never predict preparation times, always something to be done too fast at the end. When she saw Stefan inside, she whined, "I'm still not ready." When she saw President Perez fluttering for that instant when he passed from the outside to the kitchen projectors, she gave a little squeal and threw spinach in every direction. Then she spoke, not leaving enough time to think of proper words. "You've lost weight," she blurted. "Since the election, haven't you...?"

Embarrassed again, Stefan said, "The President of the United States," with a stern voice. In warning. Didn't Mom remember how to address him?

But the President seemed amused, if anything. "I've lost a couple kilos, yes. Job pressures. And the First Lady's anti-equatorial campaign, too."

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The joke puzzled Stefan until he stopped thinking about it.

"A drink, Mr. President? I'm having a drop for myself...."

"Wine, please. If that's not too much trouble."

Both adults giggled. Touching a control, Mom ordered an elegant glass to appear on the countertop, already filled with sparkling white wine, and their guest went through the motions of sipping it, his personality given every flavor along with an ethanol kick. "Lovely," he declared. "Thanks."

"And how is the First Lady?"

It was a trivial question, Stefan within his rights to groan.

Mom glared at him, in warning. "Go find Candace, why don't you?" Then she turned back to their guest, again inquiring about his dear wife.

"Quite well, thank you. But tired of Washington."

Mom's drink was large and colorful, projected swirls of red and green never mixing together. "I wish she could have come. I *adore* her. And oh, I love what she's done with your house."

The President glanced at his surroundings. "And I'm sure she'd approve of your tastes, Mrs. Thatcher."

"Helen."

"Helen, then."

The kitchen walls and ceiling were covered with an indoor squidskin, and they built the illusion of a tall room...except that voices and any sharp sound echoed off the genuine ceiling, flat and close, unadorned by the arching oak beams that only appeared to be high overhead.

Mom absorbed the compliment and the sound of her own name, then noticed Stefan still standing nearby. "Where's Candace? Will you *please* go find your sister, darling?"

Candace's room was in the basement. It seemed like a long run to a boy who would rather be elsewhere, and worse, her door was locked. Stefan shook the knob, feeling the throb of music that seeped past the noise barriers. "He's here! Come on!" Kicking the door down low, he managed to punch a new hole that joined half a dozen earlier kickholes. "Aren't you coming up to meet him — ?"

"Open," his sister shouted.

The knob turned itself. Candace was standing before a mirrored portion of squidskin, examining her reflection. Every other surface showed a fantastic woodland, lush red trees interspersed with a thousand Candaces who danced with unicorns, played saxophones, and rode bareback on leaping black tigers.

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The images were designed to jar nerves and exhaust eyes. But what Stefan noticed was the way his sister was dressed, her outfit too small and tight, her boobs twice their normal size. She was ready for a date, and he warned her, "They won't let you go. It's only Tuesday."

Candace gave her little brother a cutting, worldly look. "Go lose yourself."

Stefan began to retreat, gladly.

"Wait. What do you think of these shoes?"

"They're fine."

She kicked them off, without a word, then opened the door behind the mirror, mining her closet for a better pair.

Stefan shot upstairs.

Their honored guest and Mom remained in the kitchen. She was freshening her drink, and talking.

"I mean I really don't *care*," she told him. "I *know* I deserve the promotion, that's what matters." She gave her son a quick, troubled glance. "But Yankee says I should quit if they don't give it to me — "

"Yankee?"

"Yancy, I mean. I'm sorry, it's my husband's nickname."

The President was sitting on a projected stool, watching Mom sip her swirling drink once, then again.

"What do *you* think I should do? Quit, or stay."

"Wait and see," was the President's advice. "Perhaps you'll get what you deserve."

Mom offered a thin, dissatisfied smile.

Stefan thought of his comppad and his list of important questions. Where was it? He wheeled and ran to his room, finding the pad on his unmade bed, its patient voice repeating the same math problem over and over again. Changing functions, he returned to the kitchen. There'd been enough noise about decorating and Mom's job, he felt. "Mr. President? Are we doing enough about the space program?"

"Never," was the reply. "I wish we could do more."

Was the comppad recording? Stefan fiddled with the controls, feeling a sudden dull worry.

"In my tenure," the voice continued, "I've been able to double our Martian budget. Spaceborn industries have increased twelve percent. We're

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building two new observatories on the moon. And we just found life on Triton — "

"Titan," the boy corrected, by reflex.

"Don't talk to him that way!" Mom glowered, thoroughly outraged.

"Oh, but the fellow's right, Helen. I misspoke."

The amiable laugh washed over Stefan, leaving him warm and confident. This wasn't just an assignment for school, it was a mission, and he quickly scrolled to the next question. "What about the oceans, Mr. President?"

A momentary pause, then their guest asked, "What do you mean?"

Stefan wasn't sure.

"There are many issues," said the President. "Mineral rights. Power production. Fishing and farming. And the floating cities — "

"The cities."

"Fine. What do you think, Stefan? Do they belong to us, or are they free political entities?"

Stefan wasn't sure. He glanced at his pad, thinking of the islands, manmade and covered with trim, modern communities. They grew their own food in the ocean, moved where they wanted, and seemed like wonderful places to live. "They should be free."

"Why?"

Who was interviewing whom?

The President seemed to enjoy this reversal in roles. "If taxes pay for their construction — your tax money, and mine — then by what right can they leave the United States?" A pleasant little laugh, then he added, "Imagine if the First Lady and I tried to claim the White House as an independent nation. Would that be right?"

Stefan was at a loss for words.

Then Mom sat up straight, giving a sudden low moan.

Yancy was coming across the patio. Stefan saw him, and an instant later, Mom jumped to her feet, telling her son and guest, "No more politics. It's dinnertime."

Yancy entered the kitchen, approaching the projection from behind.

The President couldn't react in time. Flesh-and-bone merged with him; a distorted brown face lay over Yancy's face, which was funny.

"Why are you laughing?" snapped Yancy.

"No reason," the boy lied.

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His stepfather's temper was close to the surface now. He dropped the plate of cooked burgers on the countertop, took an enormous breath, then said, "Show your guest to the dining room. Now."

Taking his comppad, Stefan obeyed.

The President flickered twice, changing projectors. His voice flickered too, telling the boy the story of some unnamed Senator who threw a tantrum whenever rational discourse failed him. "Which is to say," he added, "I have quite a lot of practice dealing with difficult souls." And with that he gave a little wink and grin, trying to bolster the boy's ragged mood.

Stefan barely heard him; he was thinking of floating cities.

It occurred to him that he'd answered, "Yes, they should be free," for no other reason than that was his stepfather's opinion, voiced many times. The cities were uncrowded. Some allowed only the best kinds of people. And Stefan had spoken without thinking, Yancy's ideas worming their way inside him. Embarrassed and confused, he wondered what he believed that was really his own. And did it ever truly matter?

Even if Stefan could think what he wanted, how important could his opinions ever be?

The table was set for five, one place setting built from light. The President took his seat, and Stefan was across from him, scrolling through the comppad in search of new questions. Most of these came from his social studies teacher — a small, handsome Nigerian woman who didn't know Yancy. *Why do we keep our open border policy?* He didn't dare ask it. Instead he coughed, then inquired, "How are your cats, Mr. President?"

Both of them seemed happy with the new topic. "Fine, thank you." Another wink and grin. "The jaguars are fat, and the cheetah is going to have triplets."

Miniature breeds. Declawed and conditioned to be pets.

They spoke for a couple minutes about preserving rare species, Stefan mentioning his hope to someday work in that field. Then Mom burst into the room with her completed salad, and Yancy followed with some bean concoction, making a second trip for the burgers. Somewhere en route he shouted, "Candace!" and she appeared an instant later, making her entrance with a giggle and a bounce.

If anything, her boobs were even bigger. And the room's holo projectors changed her skin, making it coffee-colored.

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Mom saw the clothes and her color, then gave a shocked little groan. But she didn't dare say anything with the President here. Yancy entered the little room, paused and grimaced...then almost smiled, glancing at their guest with the oddest expression.

Why wasn't he saying anything?

The President glanced at Candace, for half a second. Then he looked straight ahead, eyes locked on Stefan. Big, worried eyes. And his projection feigned a slow sigh.

With her brown boobs spilling out, Candace sat beside President Perez.

Mom glared at her, then at Yancy. But Yancy just shook his head, as if warning her to say nothing.

Seven burgers were on the plate. The real ones were juicy; the one built from light resembled a hard lump of charcoal.

Stefan realized that he was growing accustomed to being ashamed.

Candace took nothing but a small helping of salad, giggling and looking at their guest with the same goofy flirtatious face that she used on her infinite boyfriends. "Hey, are you having a good time?"

"Mr. President," Stefan added.

His sister glared at him, snapping, "I know *that*."

"I'm having a fine time." The apparition never quite looked at her, using his spoon to build a mound of phantom beans on the phantom plate. "You have a lovely home."

Mom said, "Thank you."

Candace giggled, like an idiot.

But she wasn't stupid, her brother wanted to say. To shout.

Yancy was preparing two burgers, slipping them into their pouches of bread and adding pickles, mustard and sugar corn. Then after a first oversized bite, he grinned, telling the house computer to give them scenery. "Mount Rushmore," he demanded. "The original."

Squidskin recreated the four-headed landmark. Presidents Barker and Yarbarro were notably absent.

The current President was staring at his plate. For the first time, he acted remote. Detached. A bite of his charred burger revealed its raw red interior, blood flowing as if from an open wound. After a long pause, he looked at Stefan again, and with a certain hopefulness asked, "What's your next question, please?"

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Candace squealed, "Let me ask it!"

She shot to her feet, reaching over the table, her boobs fighting for the privilege of bursting out of her shirt. Before Stefan could react, she'd stolen his comppad, reading the first question aloud.

"Why do we keep our open border policy?"

The pause was enormous, silence coming from every direction at once. Mom stared at Yancy, pleading with her eyes. Everyone else studied the President, wondering how he would respond. Except he didn't. It was Yancy who spoke first, in a voice almost mild. Almost.

"I don't think it matters," he replied. "I think if we want to do some good, we've got to turn the flow back the other direction. If you know what I mean."

"I think we do," said President Perez.

"Fifty years of inviting strangers into our house. Fifty idiotic years of making room, making jobs, making allowances...and always making due with less and less. That's what the great Barker gave us. Her and her damned open border bullshit!"

Stefan felt sick. Chilled.

Mom began, "Now Yancy — "

"My grandfather owned an acreage, Mr. President. He ate meat three times a day, lived in a big house, and worked hard until he was told to go half-time, some know-nothing refugee given the other half of his job, and his paycheck...!"

"Employment readjustments." Their guest nodded, shrugged. "That's a euphemism, I know. There were problems. Injustices. But think of the times, Mr. Thatcher. Our government was under enormous pressures, yet we managed to carry things off — "

"Some know-nothing refugee!" Yancy repeated, his face red as uncooked meat. "And *your* party took his home, his land, needing the room for a stack of apartment buildings."

Stefan tried not to listen. He was building a careful daydream where he had a different family, and he was sitting with the President, everyone working to make his visit productive, and fun.

Yancy pointed at the old Rushmore. "A great nation built it — "

"An individual built it," the President interrupted. "Then his grateful nation embraced it."

"A free nation!"

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"And underpopulated, speaking relatively."

Pursing his heavy pink lips, Yancy declared, "We should have let you people starve. That's what I think." He took a huge breath, held it, then added, "You weren't our responsibility, and we should have shut our borders. Nothing in. Not you. Not a rat. Not so much as a goddamn fly...that's my opinion...!"

President Perez stared at his own clean plate. Eyes narrowed. The contemplative face showed a tiny grin, then he looked up at Yancy, eyes carved from cold black stone.

With a razored voice, he said, "First of all, sir, I'm a third-generation U.S. citizen. And second of all, I believe that you're an extraordinarily frightened man." A pause, a quiet sigh. "To speak that way, your entire life must be torn with uncertainty. And probably some deep, deep sense of failure, I would guess."

Stefan sat motionless, in shock.

"As for your opinions on national policy, Mr. Thatcher...well, let me just say this. These are the reasons why I believe you're full of shit."

The rebuke was steady, determined, and very nearly irresistible.

President Perez spoke calmly about war and famine, a desperate United Nations, and the obligations of wealthy people. He named treaties, reciting key passages word-for-word. Then he attacked the very idea of closing the borders, listing the physical difficulties and the economic costs. "Of course it might have worked. We could have survived. An enclave of privilege and waste, and eventually there would have been plagues and a lot of quiet hunger on the outside. We'd be left with our big strong fences, and beyond them...a dead world, spent and useless to us, and to the dead." A brief pause, then he spoke with a delicate sorrowful voice, asking, "Are you really the kind of man who could live lightly with himself, knowing that billions perished...in part because you deserved a larger dining room...?"

Yancy had never looked so tired. Of those at the table, he seemed to be the one composed of light and illusion.

The President smiled at everyone, then focused on Stefan. "Let's move on, I think. What's your next question?"

The boy tried to read his comppad, but his brain wouldn't work.

"Perhaps you can ask me, 'What do you think about this hallmark evening?'"

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"What do you think?" Stefan muttered.

"It should revolutionize our government, which isn't any surprise. Our government was born from a string of revolutions." He waited for the boy's eyes, then continued. "I love this nation. If you want me angry, say otherwise. But the truth is that we are diverse and too often divided. My hope is that tonight's revolution will strengthen us. Judging by these events, I'd guess that it will make us at least more honest."

Yancy gave a low sound. Not an angry sound, not anything.

"Perhaps I should leave." The President rose to his feet. "I know we've got another half hour scheduled — "

"No, please stay!" Mom blurted.

"Don't go," begged Candace, reaching for his dreadlocks.

Mom turned on her. At last. "Young lady, I want you out of those clothes — !"

"Why?"

" — and drain those breasts. You're not fooling anyone here!"

Candace did her ritual pout, complete with the mournful groan and the teary run to the basement.

Mom apologized to their guest, more than once. Then she told Yancy, "You can help Stefan clear the table, please. *I* will show our President the rest of *my* house."

Stefan worked fast. Scraps went into the recyke system; dishes were loaded in the sonic washer. Through the kitchen window, he saw the Grand Canyon passing into night, its blurry, imperfect edges more appropriate in the ruddy half-light. And it occurred to him that he was happy with this view, even if it wasn't real. Happier than he'd feel on any ordinary plot of real ground, surely.

His stepfather did no work. He just stood in the middle of the room, his face impossible to read.

Stefan left him to set the controls. Mom and the President were in the front room, looking outside. Or at least their eyes were pointed at the lone window. With a soft, vaguely conspiring tone, the President said, "It's not my place to give advice. Friends can. Counselors and ministers should. But not someone like me, I'm sorry."

"I know," his mother whispered. "It's just...I don't know...I just wish he would do something awful. To me, of course. Just to make the choice simple."

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What choice? And who was she talking about?

"But really, he only sounds heartless." She tried to touch their guest, then thought better of it. "In five years, Yankee hasn't lifted his hand once in anger. Not to the kids, or me. And you're right, I think. About him being scared, I mean...."

Stefan listened to every word.

"When you come next month," Mom inquired, "will you remember what's happened here?"

President Perez shook his head. His face was in profile, like on a coin. "No, I won't. Your computer has to erase my personality, by law. And you really don't have room enough to hold me. Sorry."

"I guess not," Mom allowed.

They looked outside, watching an airtaxi riding its cable past the window. The building across the street mirrored theirs, houses stacked on houses, each one small and efficient, and lightweight, each house possessing its own yard and the same solitary window facing the maelstrom that was a city of barely five million.

Several Presidents were visible.

They waved at each other, laughing with a gentle, comfortable humor.

Then their President turned, spotting the boy at the other end of the little room, and he smiled at Stefan with all of his original charm and warmth, nothing else seeming to matter.

Mom turned and shouted, "Are you spying on us?"

"I wasn't," he lied. "No, ma'am."

The President said, "I think he just came looking for us." Then he added, "Dessert. I feel like a little dessert, if I might be so bold."

Mom wasn't sure what to say, if anything.

"Perhaps something that *looks* delicious, please. In the kitchen. I very much liked your kitchen."

They gathered again, a truce called.

Candace was dressed as if ready for school, looking younger and flatter, and embarrassed. Yancy had reacquired a portion of his old certainty, but not enough to offer any opinions. Mom seemed wary, particularly of Stefan. What had he heard while eavesdropping? Then the President asked for more questions, looking straight at Yancy, nothing angry or malicious in his dark face.

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Crossing his arms, Yancy said nothing.

But Stefan thought of a question. "What about the future?" It wasn't from his comppad's list; it was an inspiration. "Mr. President? How will the world change?"

"Ah! You want a prediction!"

Stefan made sure that the comppad was recording.

President Perez took a playful stab at the layered sundae, then spoke casually, with an easy authority.

"What I'm going to tell you is a secret," he said. "But not a big one, as secrets go."

Everyone was listening. Even Yancy leaned closer.

"Since the century began, every President has had an advisory council, a team of gifted thinkers. They know the sciences. They see trends. They're experts in new technologies, history and human nature. We pay them substantial fees to build intelligent, coherent visions of tomorrow. And do you know what? In eighty years, without exception, none of their futures have come true." He shook his head, laughing quietly. "Predicted inventions usually appear, but never on schedule. And the more important changes come without warning, ruining every one of their assessments." A pause, then he added, "My presence here, for instance. Not one expert predicted today. I know because I checked the records myself. No one ever thought that a President could sit in half a billion kitchens at once, eating luscious desserts that will never put a gram on his waist."

Yancy growled, asking, "Then why do you pay the bastards?"

"Habit?" The President shrugged his shoulders. "Or maybe because nothing they predict comes true, and I find that instructive. All these possible futures, and I don't need to worry about any of them."

A long, puzzled silence.

"Anyway," said the President, "my point is this: Now that we've got this technology, every prediction seems to include it. In fact, my experts are claiming that in fifty years, give or take, all of us will spend our days floating in warm goo, wired into the swollen Net. Minimal food. No need for houses or transportation. Maximum efficiency for a world suddenly much less crowded." He gazed at Stefan, asking, "Now does that sound like an appealing future?"

The boy shook his head. "No, sir."

"It sounds *awful*," Mom barked.

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Candace said, "Ugh."

Then Yancy said, "It'll never happen. No."

"Exactly," said their guest. "It's almost guaranteed not to come true, if the pattern holds." He took a last little bite of his sundae, then rose. "You asked for a prediction, son. Well, here it is. Your life will be an unending surprise. If you're lucky, the surprises will be sweet and come daily, and that's the best any of us can hope for. I think."

The silence was relaxed. Contemplative.

Then the President gestured at the projected clock high above their stove. "Time to leave, I'm afraid. Walk me out?"

He was speaking to Stefan.

Hopping off his stool, the boy hugged himself and nodded. "Sure, Mr. President. Sure."

The Grand Canyon was dark, the desert sky clear and dry. But the genuine air was humid, more like Indiana than Arizona. There were always little clues to tell you where you were. Stefan knew that even the best systems fell short of being *real.*

In a low, hopeful voice, he said, "You'll come back in a month. Won't you, sir?"

"Undoubtedly." Another smile. "And thank you very much. You were a wonderful host."

What else? "I hope you had a good time, sir."

A pause, then he said, "It was perfect. Perfect."

Stefan nodded, trying to match that smile.

Then the image gave a faint, "Good-bye," and vanished. He suddenly just wasn't there.

Stefan stared at the horizon for a long moment, then turned and saw that the house was whole again. Their computer had enough power to add color and all the fancy touches. Under the desert sky, it looked tall and noble, and he could see the people sitting inside, talking now. Just talking. Nobody too angry or too sad, or anything. And it occurred to Stefan, as he walked up toward them, that people were just like the house, small inside all their clothes and words and big thoughts.

People were never what they appeared to be, and it had always been that way. And always would be.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

The Memory Cathedral, by Jack Dann, Bantam, 528pp, $22.95

Pasquale's Angel, by Paul J. McAuley, Avonova, 374pp, $22.00

I'VE OBSERVED in these pages before that the characteristic vector of science fiction is forward in time: to many, it's one of the easiest ways to distinguish science fiction from fantasy (if a distinction need be made). Science fiction typically focuses on the future, speculating (at greater or lesser remove) about what might wait at the next turn of the calendar. But in recent years some writers have taken a different tack, framing their what-ifs in the past rather than the future tense — speculating not about the technological revolutions of tomorrow, but about those that might have greatly altered the past. The Victorian era has thus far been the most popular setting for such scenarios; think of *The Difference Engine* by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, wherein Charles Babbage gets his gear-and-crank-shaft computer built and working after all, ushering in the computer revolution a century or more ahead of time. Like their forward-thinking cousins, such stories reveal as much about our own world as they do about their fictional ones, offering us our reflections in a speculative looking-glass.

It seems quite appropriate that the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance become the next locus for these imagined pasts. In the nineteenth century we can see many of the characteristics of our own time beginning to coalesce — even the shape of our own branch of literature, coming into its own in the work of Verne, Wells, and others. Likewise, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we find the foundations of the modern world taking firm root, and see the birth of the very future-oriented worldview upon which science fiction depends. It's no accident

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that the first utopian "novels," the forerunners of sf, began to appear not much later, along with early stories of trips to the moon and the other planets. The Renaissance presents as revealing a stage for speculation as the Victorian era, and perhaps even a better one, for we know so much less about those centuries than we do about the nineteenth, leaving more room for science-fictional instrusion.

Jack Dann's first novel since *The Man Who Melted* (1984) carries us to the Florence of the late fifteenth century, the time of Lorenzo "the Magnificent" de' Medici, Botticelli, Machiavelli, Pico della Mirandola, and the main character of *The Memory Cathedral*, Leonardo da Vinci. Subtitled a "secret history" of Leonardo, it's as much as secret history of the High Renaissance as it is of the man himself.

The first half of this hefty book feels like a straight historical novel — a good one, full of color and detail and the atmosphere and feeling of the period, but without much sign of anything very speculative. We meet the young da Vinci, an artist of growing reputation who's distracted by his interest in engineering and his passionate love affair with a daughter of one of Florence's wealthy banking families. But very quickly what seems like a comfortable life is upended: his lover Ginevra is to wed another of the city's rich merchants in order to aid her family's fortunes, breaking Leonardo's heart. As he pines and plots to win her back, Dann offers us a panorama of the city and its people; we meet the young Machiavelli, Leonardo's friend Botticelli, and other better and lesser-known figures; and we watch as Leonardo's plans for a flying machine develop into something that might actually work.

This is the first taste of speculative departure — and it's not much of one, since we know that da Vinci had such plans and many others in his notebooks; there's just no record of him ever building and flying such a machine. But it's the first step in Dann's "secret history," which he builds very carefully on what we do and don't know about Leonardo's life. There's a gap of several years in our records of him — no way to place him firmly anywhere in Italy, or anywhere in Europe, for that matter — and curiously enough we also have some letters written by Leonardo to an Eastern potentate, the Devatdar of Syria, indicating that Leonardo spent time traveling in the Middle East. Historians dismiss these letters as some kind of fiction, but they're exactly the sort of thing that gets a science fiction writer thinking. What if da Vinci really had gone to the

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Middle East, and what if he had actually built some of the devices he wrote of and sketched, the armored tank-like carts, the grenades and bombs, the repeating cannon, the flying machines?

Before leaping into Leonardo's Eastern adventures, though, Dann follows what we know about his life in Florence, focusing particularly on the famous accusation of "sodomy" that ruined his reputation and has led many modern historians to conclude that da Vinci was homosexual. Dann thinks otherwise, and much of the book's first half (perhaps too much?) is devoted to countering this charge. We learn little about Leonardo's character at this stage beyond his all-consuming love for Ginevra, to the point where we start to get a little frustrated with his tantrums and swoons. And we wonder, would it have been so bad if da Vinci *had* been gay?

But this is the only significant flaw in the book, I think. Dann offers a brilliantly textured portrait of Renaissance Florence, revealing the time in all its contradictory glory. Very early we're treated to scenes of the sudden violence and brutality that went hand-in-hand with the era's better-known intellectual refinement, horrified to see a young man (derisively called "ebreo," or Jew) savagely lynched for sacrilege in the piazza outside the city's famous cathedral. Dann likewise reveals the poverty and filth in which most Florentines lived, and the destructive factionalism that has always characterized that city's politics; and he gives us some wonderful glimpses of the magic and mysticism that was as much the rule of the day as Leonardo's more scientific view. One of the most colorful moments introduces us to Kuan Yin-hsi, an Asian in the service of the Caliph of Egypt, who travels to Europe on occasion. He gives a delightful performance of the kind of mnemonic marvels which were possible at the time (the book's title, in fact, refers to the memory-enhancement techniques practiced by many intellectuals of the age).

The scenes with Kuan also reveal another dark side of Leonardo's day — the growth of a repressive puritanical totalitariansim in the Church. At the same time men like da Vinci were beginning to push beyond the bounds of traditional knowledge, the Church was growing increasingly hostile to such pursuits. As Kuan and Leonardo discuss books, philosophy, and other matters, an unctuously threatening cardinal intrudes: "'one should be most careful, for such texts are held in dispute by the Church.'" The atmosphere of re-

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pression becomes even more tangible during one of the early chapters' best scenes, in which Leonardo guides Lorenzo de' Medici and Machiavelli into a cave near his home town of Vinci, in which he had found as a boy a fossil creature — "A serpent . . . a gigantic beast caught in the stone" — as well as the fossils of seashells, miles from the sea inside the mountain. Leonardo boldly suggests that the tale of the Flood must have been wrong, and these fossils the proof of long ages before humankind, but even his free-thinking companions find his ideas too risky, and leave Leonardo feeling utterly alone, "as isolated from his ken as the monster he had left behind." Though we think of da Vinci as a paragon of his age, Dann shows us a man alone in his time, with few if any others to share his ideas and attitudes. We have to wonder, then, if our opinions of our own time are much better — if perhaps such free-thinkers are still rather isolated, surrounded by increasing intolerance and suspicion.

For all of *The Memory Cathedral's* early strengths, the book truly comes into its own only with Leonardo's trip to the East. We can sense the freedom that Dann enjoys here, unconstrained by the facts — the sheer excitement of speculation. For an sf reader, this is the heart of the book: the marvel of seeing da Vinci's inventions at work, the thrill of glimpsing a history that never was, or that might have been. Dann portrays the alien world of the Caliph's court with as much assurance as he did the more familiar environs of Florence, and we're as disturbed as Leonardo by the ever-present air of casual menace in this place where a man might have another killed on a whim. Here we meet Kuan again, but he's much different in this other context; gone is the exhuberance of his wit, and instead he's cold and calculated, willing even to kill his European friends at the slightest word of his master.

Here also Leonardo's character comes more alive. In the East, a fish out of water, he begins to see himself and the world differently, and we get to know him better for that. Mostly, though, he confronts the terrible reality of the weapons he has so idly and dispassionately designed — though he had carefully sketched massacred bodies and severed limbs with his plans, he's not prepared to see them first-hand, and it's this experience that changes Leonardo most: "with every death, with every bursting of flesh and transformation of the stuff into soul, he felt heavier, as if every loss was his terrible gain." In this again we see our own times

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reflected in Leonardo's world; it's impossible to miss the parallel between Leonardo's war machines and those which shocked and transformed our own world in the First World War. His reaction echoes Europe's during that conflict, after which war could never be viewed so gloriously again.

Without the element of speculation, without Leonardo's journeys in the East and the realization of his inventions, *The Memory Cathedral* would have made a fine historical novel; with them, it becomes something much different, and much more satsifying and meaningful. The book's final third is where Dann really shines, and it takes on that numinous sense of reality that only an imagined world can. If at the end we're not sure that we know the real Leonardo much better than before, we undoubtedly perceive his time, and ours, more clearly and intimately than we did.

Paul J. McAuley's most recent book, *Pasquale's Angel*, gives us not a secret history, but an alternate one, though it turns on essentially the same element of speculation. Here it was Lorenzo de' Medici, not his brother Giuliano, who was killed by the Pazzi conspirators in the cathedral in 1478, and Giuliano hired Leonardo da Vinci as his war engineer in his conflict with the papacy. Thus da Vinci built his war machines, this time in Florence rather than the Middle East, and subsequent history took some very different turns. With da Vinci's inventions as a starting point, sixteenth-century Florence has become industrialized and as polluted as Victorian England with "the murk spewed by foundries and manufactories"; engineers and "artificers" are more honored than most artists (among them our hero, Pasquale); an elderly Leonardo lives as a hermit in his Great Tower; and Florence, not Spain, dominates in the New World. Early on one character says, "'Imagine what would have happened if it had been Cortis, instead of Amerigo Vespucci, who first made treaty with Motecuhzoma!'" What would have happened is the history we all know.

Where Dann concentrates on limning his setting and exploring Leonardo's character, McAuley offers a fast-paced detective story complete with chase scenes, lowlife informants, double-crosses, you name it. In this world, Niccolò Machiavegli is a boozing reporter for a broadsheet published by one Pietro Aretino (in our world, a poet and pornographer); the young Pasquale joins Machiavegli as an on-the-spot illustrator during Machiavegli's investigation of a mur-

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der that may be part of a plot that threatens the whole city. There's more than the occasional echo of Conan Doyle in all this — Machiavegli puts on a Holmesian display of observation and deduction at the crime scene, and the dictum he recites for Pasquale ("'We can only consider the unlikely when the probable has been ruled out, and the impossible when nothing else is left'") neatly inverts the famous detective's rule of thumb. The story rumbles along at a brisk trot — it's the sort of book that can keep you reading far past your bedtime — but now and then McAuley lets his tale slide too far toward the less engaging clichés of the detective plot (a scene with Machiavegli's busybody landlady and the journalist's excuse that his drinking is "'For medicinal purposes only'" made me wince, as did the predictable taunts of one of the villains).

In *Pasquale's Angel*, the sf touches start on the first page and continue throughout the book, as delightful as those in Dann's Eastern chapters — colorful instances of sixteenth-century high-tech (acetylene lamps, a heat-driven printing press, a dilating wooden door), intrusions of contemporary images ("On the rooftops, sharpshooters armed with the latest long-barreled rifles stood against the sky"), and little bits of scientific detail ("sounds arriving one after the other according to the law of propagation of waves through air") that simultaneously evoke the feel of science fiction and the flavor of the Renaissance. Like Dann, McAuley shows us the split-personality of the era, juxtaposing the aura of progress and cultural efflorescence with scenes of shocking poverty and barbarity, the suddenness of violence as angry guards lynch a servant after a poisoning, only to find out he was innocent.

McAuley's alternate Florence makes the parallels with our own world all the more obvious, and disturbing. The awful pollution and the exploitation of the workers (some of whom have their heads shaved as part of "a scheme of the artificers to eliminate lice") recall the worst flaws of a capitalist system, and not surprisingly some Florentines wonder whether industrialization was a good idea. "'They say the artificers have freed men to be themselves,'" says one old working man, "'but their machines make men like me less than beasts, working to their pace until we can work no more, and when we have outgrown our use we are thrown aside.'" The contemporary commentary can hardly be more clear.

Though their historical settings might lead some to treat these books

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as fantasies, that seems to me a mistake. They may not be set in the future, and the technology may be rather quaint, but *The Memory Cathedral* and *Pasquale's Angel* have more in common with science fiction — even hard science fiction — than they do with what we usually call fantasy. For all their differences, both books take as their starting point a very slight and very plausible bit of scientific speculation — there's far more reason to believe that da Vinci might have been able to build his war machines in the fifteenth century than there is to think we'll ever travel faster than the speed of light, for instance — and they work out the implications with the same sort of rigor that hard sf writers bring to their extrapolations of alien landscapes and propulsion drives. Dann and McAuley use their speculative leaps in the same way as well, as a means of awakening thoughts in us about the world and time we actually live in, above and beyond the thrill of glimpsing these might-have-beens. They show us that there's as much to be learned in speculating about our past as there is in dreaming of the future.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Jigsaw Woman, by Kim Antieau, ROC, 1996, 240pp, $9.95

I HAVEN'T discussed the work of Washington State writer Kim Antieau in this column before because her published work has mostly been short fiction and it's only now that her first novel is available. And for you completists, yes, I know, she had a short story collection before this — *Trudging to Eden*, published by the Silver Salamander Press in 1994 — but I wrote an introduction for it and I really do try to stay away from reviewing books with which I've had any personal involvement.

The reason I wrote the aforementioned introduction is that, from the time I first read one of Antieau's short stories (I believe it was in a volume of Charlie Grant's much-missed *Shadows* anthology series from Doubleday), I was utterly taken with the lyric beauty of her prose and the sensitivity with which she tackled difficult issues. She seemed one of those rare writers who get it all right: the characters, the settings, story, resonance.

Subsequent stories in various other magazines and anthologies only corroborated that initial reaction and over the years since I first discovered her work, I often find myself pulling out one those stories to reread. They simply won't leave my mind and never seem to lose their luster. The only thing I kept wondering was why no one had gotten around to publishing a novel by her.

(Which, I should add, isn't to denigrate short fiction. Readers of this magazine don't need me to extol its worth, but it's a sad fact that most people simply don't read shorter work — to their loss. The thing about a novel is that it's more accessible to a wider audience and allows a writer to make a living where they can't writing short fiction, Harlan Ellison being one of the most visible exceptions.)

ROC Books has finally done the sensible thing and made a novel by Antieau available and it makes for a marvelous debut.

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The Jigsaw Woman opens as might a horror novel (think *The Bride of Frankenstein*) with our protagonist Keelie coming into awareness to discover that one Dr. Victor Beaumont has created her from the bodies of three beautiful—and deceased—women. The section in Beaumont's mansion, as Keelie strives to gain some sense of personal identity, reads like a wonderful combination of *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, complete with the evil doctor and an odd cast of curious, and at times whimsical, characters. But then, just when you think you know what this book's all about, it takes a sharp turn straight into the dark forests of fairy tale and myth.

Keelie leaves the mansion and struggles to find herself. She starts by tracking down the families of the women from whom she was made, but understanding their lives doesn't take her far enough. An encounter with a darker aspect of the mother goddess sends her spiraling back into the past, through the various lives of the other three women, herself, and the doctor. She sees the mistakes they've been doomed to repeat, life after life, but finally returns far enough into the past to find a time when they lived in harmony. Now all she has to do is find a way to return to the present and put into practice what she's learned.

The journey is a harrowing one — through witch burnings, the Inquisition, the colonization of the Americas and other dreadful times — and it is told with a poet's eye and an empath's appreciation. Sometimes Keelie and her companions are victims, sometimes victors, but while this isn't a frivolous book, neither does it take itself so seriously as to become solely didactic. There are warm and loving moments to balance the dark, from candle flickers to celebratory bonfires.

From my previous familiarity with Antieau's work, I'm not surprised that *The Jigsaw Woman* is so good. Never mind that it's a brilliant first novel; it's a brilliant novel, period.

I might also add, for those of you who like this sort of thing, that Antieau edits a lovely small-press magazine called *Daughters of Nyx* which is dedicated to goddess stories, mythmaking and fairy tales. You can order copies from Ruby Rose's Fairy Tale Emporium, Box 1187, White Salmon, WA 98672; $4.50 an issue.

An Exchange of Gifts, by Anne McCaffrey, ROC, 1995, 96pp, $12.95, Trade paperback

And speaking of fairy tales, if you missed this novelet when it was first published by Wildside Press, now's your chance to pick up a copy at a more affordable price, although I should warn

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you that, when the publisher indicates that it's been illustrated by Pat Morrissey, what they really mean to say is that she provided one quite lovely border design which they've repeated throughout the book.

But perhaps that's being picayune. McCaffrey's story is a sweet fairy tale of a princess escaping the confines of her station to make a new life for herself in a woodcutter's cottage where she is befriended by a mysterious young boy named Wisp. The prose, as one might expect from McCaffrey at this point in her career, is polished, the story's setting fully realized with only a few careful strokes. And while the characterization and plot have a somewhat familiar ring, they offer the same comfort that a traditional fairy tale might. The real delight is in the details, and the warmth of McCaffrey's storytelling.

Whit, by Iain Banks, Little, Brown & Co., 1995, 455pp, £15.99 Hardcover

I'm embarrassed to admit that this is the first Iain Banks novel I've read, for all that it's his fourteenth book and any number of friends have continually recommended his work to me. I never even knew that he wrote under two (rather similar, one has to admit) names: "Iain Banks" for his more mainstream books, "Iain M. Banks" for his sf. But I understand the enthusiasm now. I initially picked up a copy of *Whit* for a friend on a recent trip to the UK, but after reading the first few chapters, had to go and buy myself a copy as well.

Whit, or Isis Among the Unsaved, to give the novel's its full title, is a wonderful and sympathetic excursion into the character of a young woman raised in what most of us would consider a cult — one of those fringe religious communes whose tenets and philosophies never seem to make much sense to those on the outside.

Isis is going to be the next leader of the Luskentyrians and much of the novel is taken up with her adventures outside their Scottish ashram — first in an attempt to bring back her cousin Morag, who appears to have strayed from the fold, and then to clear her own name when power-jockeying in the ashram has her banished.

Banks never expects us to believe the cult's tenets, but he has Isis set them forth sincerely (the novel is told from her point of view) and remains sympathetic — not to the Luskentyrians, per se, but rather as a way of putting forth a commentary on how quick we are to judge and dismiss anything that doesn't fit into our own personal worldviews. A broad comedic strand runs through

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the book — particularly in Isis' experiences with those she meets outside the ashram — but *Whit* also deals seriously with the issues of hatred and abuses of power.

I think Banks' background in sf has stood him good here, for he does a thorough job of chronicling the origins and subsequent development of the cult — as much a kind of worldbuilding as that required for more obvious sf/fantasy novels. And while I doubt readers will want to join the Luskentyrians — for all that much of their philosophy is commendable — you will certainly be quickly rooting for Isis. And when you've turned the last page, saying your goodbyes to Isis and the rest of *Whit's* quirky cast, I'm also sure you'll soon be tracking down some more of Banks' work.

Cyberpunk Handbook, by St. Jude, R.U. Sirius, and Bart Nagel. Random House, 1995, 192pp, $9.95 Trade paperback

I'm not sure I can recommend that you should go out and buy this book — humor of this sort tends to have as short an entertainment span as it does a shelf-life — but if you've got some extra cash and are looking for something to leave on the coffee table or in the bathroom to amuse yourself and your friends, you could do worse. And it helps to have some interest in cyberpunk, the Web, William Gibson, riot grrls, et al.

Subtitled *The Real Cyberpunk Fakebook*, it's basically a play on all those other handbooks we've seen over the years only this time it purports to teach you everything you need to know to be a cyberpunk — or to fake it. Chock full of amusing photos and descriptions, odd spellings, in jokes, glossaries, crosswords and the like, it'll keep you amused during those times when you can't get on-line, or your system's gone down.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Brief Reviews: Books

All the Bells on Earth, by James P. Blaylock, Ace, 1995, 376pp, $21.95, Hardcover

IN THE middle of the night, a shadowy figure sabotages the bells in St. Anthony's. Down the street at the Holy Spirit, another terrorizes Father Mahoney. Later that night a man spontaneously bursts into flame. In the midst of all this malevolence, the Bluebird of Happiness arrives in a misdelivered package on Walt Stebbins's doorstep. But nothing is quite what it seems, from the mysterious Satanic priest Flanagan to the diabolically tormented Robert Argyle, who will give anything to buy back his soul before the contract comes due. This is a deal-with-the-Devil story as only Blaylock can write it, full of madcap action and heartwarming insight into the true nature of compassion and love. One Hell of a book.

Resurrection Man, by Sean Stewart, Ace, 1995, 248pp, $11, Trade Paper

In Sean Stewart's alternate present, magic began seeping into the world following World War II. It manifests in humans, giving them "angel" powers; it manifests in other ways, some malevolent, some neutral, some occasionally helpful. People have learned to live with it.

The book opens with the protagonist, Dante Ratkey, staring at and then performing a dissection on a corpse that looks like his own. This body is one of a number of "angel things" that haunt Dante. Is his brother Jet really a soulless changeling? What can he catch with the evil wasp lure on his father's desk?

Resurrection Man is a wonderful, lyrical, spooky blend of the mythic with the commonplace. Stewart's skillful writing and perceptive characterization are a joy to read.

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Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia, by John Clute, DK Publishing, $39.95, Hardcover

John Clute's writing is elegant, as ever, and far juicier and more personal than you would expect in a reference work. This is half the pleasure in reading this book.

The other half is looking at more than 1,000 full-color illustrations and photos of authors, magazine and book jackets, and posters, which the designers have done a superb job of integrating with the text.

Given Clute's experience as an historian of sf, accuracy should hold up well, though there were two errors in the few references to *F&SF*: "A Canticle to Leibowitz" was credited to *Galaxy* (it appeared here in 1955), and one editor, Robert Mills, was omitted.

The colorful and opinionated author profiles will probably offer the most enjoyment and controversy, and the time charts are also appealing, if on occasion they give a somewhat comic overblown importance to sf: "1941: Japan bombs Pearl Harbor. Campbell kills *Unknown* in order to save precious paper for *Astounding*."

Overall, this is a rarity: a lovely coffee table book that is also fun to read.

Amnesia Moon, by Jonathan Lethem, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995, 247pp, $20.00, Hardcover

The book opens with Chaos and Melinda, his fur-covered girl-companion, escaping Kellogg, the local tyrant, to embark on a road trip. Chaos is searching for his lost love and missing identity in a post-apocalyptic world, only he can't remember what caused the breakup, either of his world or his relationship.

Along the way they're waylaid in the Country of the Blind, marked with a pink splotch by an airplane in the Nevada desert, and constantly guided, or is it misguided?, by the dreams Chaos unwittingly broadcasts.

Will the answers finally be revealed in San Francisco's Submission District where a televangelist lurks in the streets or in No Alley where it all began? The truth is more than a little complicated, but finding it is a pure joy. *Amnesia Moon* is a fast and fascinating read delivering the impossible in utterly convincing style. Highly recommended.

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Ron Savage's short fiction has appeared in Temple University's literary magazine, Modern Short Stories, *and* F&SF, *among other magazines. He works as a psychologist in Williamsburg, Virginia.*

About "Connecticut Nazi," he writes, "In my work, I have dealt with the children of survivors, and we don't realize how the battles go on and on, generation after generation, long after the war has ended."

Connecticut Nazi

By Ron Savage

ROSALIE BOUGHT ME A telescope for my fiftieth birthday, an expensive brass one with a tripod, but the woods surround our new house and there's nothing to see. She's a typical social worker, who assumes reality can be shuffled about like the takeout items on some Chinese menu.

" — Max, honey, pessimism *isn't* an attractive quality." And propping her naked self up, elbow against the mattress I'd hauled into the empty living room last night, Rose winks and says, "Learn to look past the trees."

My cryptic angel.

We've been married less than a week: the bride, a twenty-six-year-old knockout Rumanian from the Lower East Side; and the groom, strictly Central Park West via Brooklyn, an orthodox Jew, addicted to whatever might smuggle him beyond his tenuous middle-age.

I have a lymphoma. It's in remission, almost eight months, but I feel awful, you know? I honestly feel the pain.

A July sun is glittering the front windows, light fractured by all those

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trees, the morning sticky and hot. Rays thread the shade of the living room, glaring the dust white, the oak floor covered with scattered clothes and toiletries, four open suitcases, and a battery-powered mini fridge near the bed.

The movers promised to deliver the furniture Monday, the day after tomorrow. They're Third World refugees, very superstitious, and believe weekends in Connecticut damage the soul.

I didn't make an issue. Who wants a Haitian voodoo curse *and* cancer.

Now the exquisite Mrs. Rosalie Nicole Kravitz *née* Cuza sits cross-legged on the mattress, stiffening her back, yawning audibly, her skinny girl body deep in the brightness and shadows.

"Maybe you should've tipped the guys a few dollars," my bride says, meaning the movers. She's staring down at her small breasts, as if instructing them instead of me, the nipples dark and the size of baby fingers. "People need motivation, honey. Tickets to a Mets game, an extra hundred — "

"Our first born," adding to the list while I lug the telescope toward another window. Besides the damn lymphoma, I'm also getting a hernia. "Where'd you find such uh..." *act nice* "...interesting gift?"

"Beckman's," she says, and stands, arms stretching above her head, black hair tangled from sleep. God, the woman is *definitely gorgeous*. "C'mon, Max, you remember: Lower East Side, the antique shop off Canal Street."

What am I, senile? I'm shooting the summer project there, in the Hasidic district. I do a couple of films a year — since age thirty-seven — the latest being a serio-comedy about sex, Jewish mysticism, and death, three favorite subjects.

Yesterday my analyst said I had become far too successful to end these obsessions; she claimed I was an international neurotic whose art and anhedonia were indistinguishable.

Everybody's a Pauline Kael.

"...Darling, but real emaciated." The lovely Mrs. Kravitz recounting Beckman. "He'd been a prisoner in one of those camps, no lie, honey, a Treblinka survivor." The old man has stumbled into her social worker's heart, her odd passion for tragedy and strangers. "We had coffee and rumcake, right in the back of his store, the *cutest* apartment. *Oh*, the stories, Maxy!" Words turn cautious, "He...He knew your mother."

The telescope faces the corner window. I adjust the brass tripod, staying quiet, not wanting to discuss Momma or her camp friend.

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Then Rosalie's embracing me, flushed and damp from the morning heat; she, chest-high even on the tips of her toes, gazing up and asking, "Are you sorry?"

"...'Bout us?"

The bride nods; says, "Uh-huh."

"I adore you," I tell her, and it's true. I've been married twice, both raging disasters. My fault, their fault, who cares. But finally I'm blessed with an endearing, benevolent person; even more unnerving, and how dissimilar to the international neurotic's previous choices, an actual Jewish woman. (The others were of the *shiksa* persuasion.)

What I don't tell her is the baseball bat story — same city, different shoot, the winter project — where the insane Beckman demolishes a 35mm Mitchell BNC, lenses included. The police had to come and drag the old man off the set. Fan*tas*tic scene: five cops wrestling a ninety-pound maniac, his fists whacking the air; him shouting, "Big comedian! Anti-semite! *Mumzer*! You're not funny, Kravitz! Our suffering ain't funny! May Jehovah bring a curse! Let the Jews laugh at *your* misery!"

He's probably booby-trapped the telescope.

Rosalie and I met on Christmas Eve night, Seventh Avenue and Fifty-fifth, the Carnegie Deli just a footstep away. I was lying in the snow, holding my left thigh, the pain scaring me bad enough to wet myself, and not one clue, you know, that was the terrifying part. Nothing unusual had occurred; certainly nothing to cause an injury. When I looked down, I saw blood, the protruding bone.

And I fainted.

Only to be revived the hard way: by the Salvation Army abusing "Deck the Halls." Trumpets fought shrieking clarinets as I peered into the snowfall, the flakes big, feathery, reflecting Carnegie's yellow light. I remember watching Rose kneel and the bits of ice on her eyelashes, the nonstop shiver, her cheeks and nose chilled raw; remember the smile too, half concealed in a frayed, navy blue scarf. "I — I phoned the ambulance," she said, and took a deli bag from the pocket of her denim jacket. "You like corn beef?"

Precious Rosalie.

Mount Sinai had Drs. Cohen and Cohen, the cancer boys. They did a biopsy of my bone marrow; that, and radiation therapy for a multiple

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myeloma. The Cohens also showed me their video. Cartoon viruses wore Nazis uniforms. The Cohens wanted to talk Movie Deal while the Nazis invaded unsuspecting cells in the shape of eastern Europe. "Okay, wait, wait," said a Cohen. "You'll appreciate our dramatic effect." Darkness began slipping along the landscape, the letters DNA super-imposed. Soon swastikas materialized, *blip blip blip*, marking the defeated countries.

"Get the concept?"

I stared at the TV. "Nazis are in my body."

"We used a *film noir* approach," said Cohen.

"Sort of zombie Nazis," said the other Cohen.

Rosalie visited during the evenings, brought paperback books, hot sandwiches, and wedges of chocolate cheesecake. I loved her immediately. But divorce can take a person's confidence. With two divorces, you're ready to date inanimate objects.

My anxieties hadn't bothered Rose — not the busted marriages or the cancer — she ignored my fears, laughed at all the jokes, and played gin rummy like a convicted felon. Death didn't have the *chutzpa* to face Rosalie the Rumanian.

Cohen and Cohen swore they'd stopped the lymphoma. I pictured the zombie Nazis on the run, a retreating gloom, cartoon swastikas vanishing in the video rewind.

plib plib plib

But as I packed to leave Sinai, old thoughts reappeared. What if the Cohens had won the battle and not the war? What if the Nazi viruses were plotting new strategies? What if I'm walking down the street a month from now and my bones dissolve?

Listen, it could happen.

Another thought: Beckman. *May Jehovah bring a curse!* The insane Beckman

knew your mother

knew your...

Momma spoke a lot about Treblinka and the boy; he would have been eighteen then, in 1943, four years younger than her. "You should've seen him pray, Maxy. Tears, moans, the works. My hand t'God, a regular rabbi." She'd be gazing out the kitchen window, rinsing the supper dishes, attending to images that had always eluded me. "His prayers killed a guard. Did I

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mention?" Saying an old fact, "He prayed a guard dead."

Terrific. The lunatic nebbish has connections.

I can't sleep. Rosalie's snoring, not loud but the rhythm is irregular, a gummy clicking at the back of her throat. The forest noises don't help, either. Tiny hooves patter through the leaves. Birds scream. Suicidal insects hurl themselves against the window screens. Connecticut nights are comparable to living in a zoo, except the animals here do shift work.

Moonlight powders the oak floor with silver, disrupting the shadows. I glance around the living room, the clothes separated into neat mounds, suitcases stacked, the telescope a phantom on scrawny tripod legs.

This weekend business is Mrs. Kravitz's idea. Our Honeymoon Getaway. We've *no* electricity, so forget air-conditioning. The heat won't quit. My body fluids are down two quarts; I'm positive the lymphoma will snap a bone. And earlier she pouted, wanting to know, "Where's your romantic spirit, Max?" Am I supposed to answer that? Maybe the damn thing took a suite at the Sherry Netherland. *I* would. Why do women —

Whoa...

Jesus, *whoa!*

LIGHT RUSHES from the lens of the telescope, laser-fine and brilliant, flaring across the room, hovering over the mattress, inches above me and the still unconscious Rose. I keep watching, squinting up, feeling my stomach constrict, hand groping the top of the mini fridge for my glasses. Trees stir, branches scrape the house. I smell urine and bowel — country ambiance, no doubt. Oh *God*. The light's vibrating. It blooms suddenly, the room cut with such intolerable radiance that I have to shut my eyes. But the light is here and gone.

Rosalie hasn't budged. Amazing.

I drape the blue sheet about her breasts, kissing the bride's perspiring forehead. She sighs, fingers kneading the pillow, asleep yet mumbling, "...woveyoumex."

"Love you too," a whisper as I move toward my brass phantom.

The telescope *looks* normal. I tap the cylinder, the lenses, and automatically fantasize being the kid on *Mr. Wizard*. What would Don Herbert say?

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Got a storm coming, Max. Freak lightning. Brass is an excellent conductor.

Of course, right. Lightning.

Or...

I peer out the window. "Or?"

...Or the insane Beckman's praying again.

My thigh bone starts to throb. The lymphoma is worse than a conscience. I decide to go with the lightning hypothesis but scan the woods to be prudent. Branches clatter; the breeze enters the open windows, carrying the odor of urine and bowel. Leaves shiver under the moon. I mutter, "Are you there, Beckman?" and imagine the old man leaping from behind a shrub, inflamed by Torah and Cabala, waving his fist and prancing among the trees. Then I peek into the lens of the telescope.

We've been at the train station twelve hours now, since the morning, your Aunt Zadie, myself, Grandpop. Neighborhood people, mostly. I ask a young soldier why there isn't any food for us, any water. Such a handsome boy, Maxy, the grayest eyes. He says to be patient; he says, "The cooks have prepared a splendid feast. Our camp's small. But if you lose your way, just follow the Road to Heaven." And I think, what a pretty name. And the young soldier smiles...

I'm hearing Momma's voice, the telescope forming the images: her memories fixed with a son's details, a son's invention, images collected from stories and from the photos she had arranged on the walls — histories pinned together and assigned to pewter frames, pictures done in grainy tints of yellow and brown, strangers who belonged to me but had never visited Brooklyn — a son patching the dead faces to the dead lives, a way to explain her nightmares, her cries, her distance.

...The train arrives sometime during the night. We're told to hurry and board. I hear the guards yelling, "You don't want to miss supper! Aren't you hungry? Aren't you thirsty?"

I'm climbing into one of the cars when I notice a little girl squat on the platform and defecate. We hadn't been allowed to use the bathrooms...

A soldier is next to the child, the young man who'd spoken to my mother, both spotlighted in the beam of an overhead lamp. I see him holster his pistol and absently unstrap the rifle from his shoulder. Everything pantomimed, everything silent. Steam rises off the long train as the last of the passengers

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step inside the darkness. Only the soldier and the child remain. She's gazing up at him. Her age six, maybe seven, I don't know. Strings of black hair web her cheeks. She is shaking, tearful. The soldier lifts his rifle, lamplight glinting the barrel. He sends the butt of the weapon into her skull. The train begins to glide past them. Arms and hands reach between the wooden slats of the boxcars. The child is lying in the luminous circle, her limbs crooked, blood obscuring her face. Now the young soldier nudges the body with the toe of his boot.

The asshole is actually grinning.

Did he enjoy the evening? Will he and his psychotic friends grab a beer later and swap child mutilation techniques? After six analysts and nineteen years as a couch junkie, I still can't fathom the madness of my mother's life.

A hunched figure is running atop the boxcars. He — no, no, *she*, it's a woman — she drops to one knee and pivots, aiming a pistol at two soldiers who are chasing her. The lamplights float by them, the smoke of the train. Both hands grip the pistol, her arms outstretched, rigid, then the recoil and tiny flashes. One guard collapses in place, the other toppling backwards. All of it seen but not heard. The young soldier on the platform brings his rifle to eye-level. Again the woman fires. Once, twice. Chunks of the boy's neck rip away. A dozen or so guards hurry across the moving boxcars, toward the woman. Their weapons spike flames, cracking the shadows.

She's been shot.

Her leg...

I immediately feel pain in my left thigh. I'm beginning to question the whole multiple myeloma thing. Cancer wouldn't be this empathic.

Her leg...

Our wounds match. Whatever I had experienced Christmas Eve is identical to what I am seeing here: her blood, the protruding bone. And she's looking at me. Isn't she looking at me? The yellow lights blink over her. I adjust my glasses; my eyes blur and focus.

That face.

The woman crawls to the far edge of the boxcar, hesitates, then falls into the night.

I turn from the telescope, huffing a breath and scanning the living room, the moonlit suitcases, the folded clothes on the oak floor. *Beckman, you sonuvabitch.* Our bed's empty, sheets bunched in points and curls.

No mistake. The woman was Rose.

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TREES LINE the highway, rimmed with a pink, early morning sky. I am driving the Cherokee, heading for the city. A leather bag containing the telescope and tripod rests upright on the passenger seat, fastened by a safety harness. I've been plotting strategies, how to confront Beckman while managing my homicidal impulses, but each plan ends with me strangling the guy; yelling, *Thief! Where is she? Where's Rosalie?* I won't report him to the police. What do you say, exactly? An obsessed hasid prayed my wife into World War II?

Uh-huh, sure. Film at eleven.

The sun is traveling low behind the woods, flanking the road like a shy companion, golden amid the damp branches and leaves.

My pain's disappeared. Totally, *poof*, G-O-N-E. I am trying to stay indifferent, you know, composed. Mother always said, "If God's miracles get you too excited, He'll change His mind." (The mysteries of celestial justice.) To be without pain is remarkable, though, a blessing.

Momma didn't trust miracles. Pleasure was the intermission of an ongoing catastrophe; serenity, a betrayal of old ghosts: she couldn't forgive herself for escaping Treblinka. I grew up hearing the sobs, waking to her private horrors, and I'd see Mother huddled beside my bed, knees to chest, rocking, rocking, her shape thin and delicate beneath a cotton gown. The dreams did not vary, the same lonely terrain, the same anguish. Factual dreams: a German soldier raping her; Aunt Zadie murmuring, "...Let him. Don't you want to live, Chesia? God made you beautiful for a reason. Please, offer yourself — *let* him."

When she became pregnant with me, the German hid her in the back of his laundry truck and drove to a town four kilometers to the west, Wolka Okranglik. This was the day before the Committee of Resistance torched the camp. Three hundred and fifty inmates got past the barbed wire fence.

My analyst says escaping Treblinka didn't mean you survived; that living and surviving aren't necessarily synonymous. Perhaps it's true. But how does a son grieve a dead parent with a pulse? I know she would look at me and see only that soldier, her months of imprisonment.

The night Mother killed herself, a lifetime ago now, I'd been doing stand-up at Village Gate. Her brother Abe had called and read the note:

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Max, I am sorry. Grandpop believed our souls can't remember us after we die. Hope he is right. Love you.

Drs. Cohen and Cohen neglected the genetics. I *am* inhabited by a zombie Nazi. Momma said my father died while driving her to Wolka Okranglik.

"We're closed."

"*Beck*man, open the goddamn door."

"I got a gun."

Jesus, he does. I'm staring at him, a hand cupped above my brow and pressed to the front window of the store, the telescope bag strapped over my left shoulder. Beckman is crouching, knees bent, waving a .357 Smith & Wesson, his style reminiscent of Dirty Harry, except for the yarmulke, the tallis, and the maroon plaid, *alte kocker* bathrobe.

"I have bullets," he says. " — A gun with bullets." He also has a palsy tremor. "You understand my English? We're closed, no Saturday business."

"Hey, it's me."

The old man squints. "Me who?"

"You blind *putz*, get your glasses."

"Wait. I should put on my glasses." Beckman tucks the .357 magnum under his arm. Fingers burrow into the robe and retrieve a pair of wire-rims. He hooks them around his ears, through the white, hasidic ringlets. His eyes go bright. "Ah-ha! Kravitz, the movie star! Mr. Comedian! Ha!"

"Where's my wife, Beckman."

"The birthday boy! Ha!"

What a fruitcake.

"Hold the horses! Hold the horses!" He's shuffling over to the door, each step excruciatingly slow; muttering, "A privilege, Mr. Hotsy-Totsy Kravitz."

I hear the lock click, then a metallic thud, the sound of the pistol hitting wood. Crazy Beckman starts to slump to the floor as I enter the shop, and I catch him, grasping his waist. Skinny legs fold inward. His breathing is all wheezy. For a moment he has the appearance of a frail, confused bird. It doesn't last. He shakes loose from me and hobbles away, a teetering beeline to the rear of the store, his monologue soft, continuous, "Maxy Kravitz, pretty Chesia's Treblinka kid, ha!, wooo-weee," disappearing behind a velour curtain.

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Wonderful. Beckman's sincerely deranged. But right now *I'm* not feeling too sane myself. The walls seem to creep in and shrink the room. Antiques fill the corners with dark points. *Okay. How bizarre can he be? Relax, handle the situation. Demonstrate your tremendous inter-personal skills.* I brace the telescope bag against the counter and follow him.

Beyond the curtain, his dimlit apartment smells like Vicks Vaporub. Newspapers and books litter the Persian rug. Lopsided piles are wedged about the furniture, expensive pieces, two Queen Anne wing-backs, a mahogany desk, and a partially refinished Louis the Something chiffonier.

Beckman whispers, " — Crummy heart. The doctors, they think I'm supposed to be dying." He is sprawled on the sofa, eyes shut, bathrobe and tallis open to a wide V, exposing his neck, the small blue veins of his chest. "The telescope belonged to your momma's friend." A voice raw and weak, "That German bum who helped her escape."

"Let's discuss Rosalie," I say, *verrry* non-confrontational, Mr. Smooth, determined not to excite the old man. "Tell me the problem. Why hurt my wife? Seriously, she's an innocent person. Isn't this between us?"

The approach has class. I am Brando in *The Godfather*, asking for compassion; hoping for reasonable men.

"I murdered him," he says.

"...What?"

"Chesia's lover, her Nazi with the laundry truck." Beckman sits up, crosses those chalky, twig legs, tugging on the hem of the robe. "I prayed him dead."

The room turns warm, the odor of Vicks burning my throat and nose. I feel jittery inside, brittle. *His prayers killed a guard. Did I mention?* Yes, Mother, absolutely, but you never said *which* guard. Nor do I remember her connecting the two stories — the German and the teenage hasid — or maybe I had quit listening.

"...'A sweet baby,' Chesia called me. 'You're still a baby, Yetzel,' she'd say." The old man's caught in history, speaking of the Treblinka days, how he worshiped Mother and hated her soldier, the years spent finding his peace. "So last winter, three shyster doctors decided I was dying, and again I got angry. I gave up too much. Children. *Grand*children. But who could marry?" He does a wobbly rise off the sofa, his words sly, "We know the miseries of love, huh, Kravitz?"

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"I do now, yes."

"Ha, good."

Beckman is gripping my arm. We walk toward the mahogany desk. It's cluttered with photographs, fifteen, perhaps twenty, brass and silver frames reflecting a fluorescent glow coming from the stairway near the curtain.

He nods at the pictures. "You recognize anyone?"

Glare and shadow smear the images. I tilt my head to block the light. Nobody's familiar. His collection reminds me of the photos that had covered our wall in Brooklyn, the faces worn to the skull.

"C'mon, pay attention," says Beckman, obviously irritated. Fingers clutch a silver frame and twitch out weird Parkinsonian rhythms. "Look, Mr. Show Bid'ness, *look*."

Like a dummy I'm being accommodating, bobbing along to his tremor. Finally, I snatch the thing.

The old man stares at me as if I've slapped him. "Chesia's Nazi boy," he mumbles, his hands quivering. And louder, "It's in the blood. You and your poppa, both Nazis."

Right. Take a pill for Christsake.

With enormous control, I apologize, demeaning my impatience, pretending to study the damn picture. I will not be provoked by a maniac. Life won't be worth the effort unless Rosalie's safe; unless we're together.

He wiggles his eyebrows, Groucho style. "Such a funny Nazi boy."

I ignore the comment. Sticks and stones, etc. There are no new names, none I haven't said to myself.

Even his photograph's demented. A cluster of ten prisoners stand among the trees, skeletons wearing only muddy underwear and dark caps. Written beneath this scene, the penmanship shaky, the ink a faint brownish-yellow: *Committee of Resistance, August 2nd, 1943. Success at last!*

Beckman speaks quietly, close to my ear.

— And Jehovah says, "What can I do for you, Yetzel?" And I say, "Lord, Chesia's Nazi boy ought to feel our pain." And God says, "You want mental or physical?" And I say, "Please, a little of each."

She's in the first row, second from the left end, her thigh bandaged, a piece of soiled cloth wrapped tight and knotted, the blood dried to a half-dollar sized disk. Rose? *Oh* Rose, is that *you*? The black hair shaved, eyes uninhabited, gazing straight at the camera, porcelain bones and paper skin: another zombie on the run.

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Did you survive?

Beckman mutters, "The soldiers brought her to the camp," and giggling, poking my shoulder, "your bride didn't stay."

The old man died, three months ago now. His heart. And the telescope arrived the week after the funeral. Death apparently doesn't phase him. The guy's relentless, my hasidic Terminator. A note from his attorney said I'd been "bequeathed item #38-5." He hoped Mr. Beckman's thoughtfulness would ease my grief.

Lawyer humor.

I've set the telescope on the balcony. Across the street is Central Park, a spectacular view of autumn. Though relieved to be back in the city, I haven't had the desire to leave my apartment, and the answering machine's loaded with messages which remain unanswered.

Today I did the usual. Peered into the lens; watched other people's lives, judged performances. It's what I do best. The park was glorious this morning. An intense October sun ignited the trees, all frost, all fire, red-orange and lime. But I felt dissatisfied with the angle of the frame, the skewed distribution of light, the histrionic colors. Blah blah blah. Forever the methodical *auteur*, forever the observer. Some prisons are harder to escape than Treblinka.

Where's *my* Committee of Resistance, Beckman? When does the laundry truck arrive?

The old man swore Rosalie hadn't known his plan, repeating what Grandpop once told Momma, *Souls forget, they don't keep their memories.* Then Beckman confessed, *The woman didn't recognize me. And if you went to her, she wouldn't remember you.*

I am the second generation heir to the living dead, feeling exhausted from this incredible, desperate emptiness, reluctantly trailing the zombies. But it'll be done soon. I can feel that too.

The evening's here. I go to the balcony; the wind, abrupt and gritty, stinging my hands, my face. Beckman hasn't finished with his Nazi boy. A farewell torture, Rosalie is on the other side of the lens.

She appears at sundown, one show a night — the pursuit over boxcars, torching the camp, the panicked race to the woods — and these scenes were consistent until recently. Now I've begun seeing the shape of a man jogging behind her. Through high, reedy brush, amid pine trees, the

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silhouette's undefined yet present, shadows failing to camouflage his inept stride.

The runner is me, unmistakably me.

Who cares what Yetzel Beckman said. The guy didn't have the Jehovah franchise. Anybody can pray. And tonight I will be with her, a celebration on the other side of the lens; if not tonight, hopefully tomorrow, or the next day. Whenever. I've been reading the Cabala. You know, Jewish mysticism. The book says, our souls are paired from the exact moment God creates them. It also warns us, nothing's guaranteed, lifetimes may pass before the right souls meet. But we know, instantly, intuitively, we know the contours of that devastating fit. I don't need Rose to remember Maxy Kravitz, swooning at our reunion isn't necessary. All I need her to do is turn around. You listening, Rose? Just turn around and wait for the runner.

"I still don't see anything."

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Lynn Coulter's short fiction has appeared in First for Women, Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, *and other publications. Lynn first appeared in pages of* F&SF *in our January 1994 issue with a story called "Granny Woman." She works for the* Atlanta Journal and Constitution *as a freelance features and humor writer.*

About "Swamp Water," she writes, "Thoreau said, 'Methinks my soul must be a bright invisible green.' I like to think that mine is too."

Swamp Water

By Lynn Coulter

EVERY NIGHT MAMA HALLIE sits on the porch of her tin-roof shanty on the banks of a Louisiana bayou, listening as a chorus of mosquitoes sings in the swamp and bull gators honk love calls through razor-sharp marsh grass. Mama Hallie sits there drinking from a mayonnaise jar with a peeling blue and white label, a jar full of iced tea laced with something the locals call "swamp water," and on full-moon nights she talks to old Red Bob's leg. She says his legs were the best parts of Red Bob, until the blade at his sawmill sliced the left one off above the knee one steamy summer morning.

Mama Hallie talks to a lot of folks. And to lots of parts of folks, because Mama Hallie's shanty sits on a bayou fed by a river that floods every time it rains. When it rains, that river rises up over the oldest graveyard in the city, the one where folks used to be buried in the ground before the locals found out about low water tables, before they realized Cottontree Parish is five feet below sea level. Sometimes when the river floods the graveyard, it floats one of the coffins buried there, lifts it right out of the ground and carries it

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downstream. Sometimes a coffin snags on the black branches jutting out from Mama Hallie's bank, or on the old, submerged barbed wire fence that used to surround her sixty acres of petroleum-rich land. Now the fence has been overtaken by the swamp and lies rusting under dark, foul-smelling water, snarled in a cruel hump of wire and tree limbs. When it snags a coffin, Mama Hallie goes outside after the water recedes, the ground nearly sucking her yellow galoshes off her tree stump-sized legs, and unsnarls the branches and hauls her find to her old garden spot. There she re-buries it, as is proper and fitting for Louisiana folks. On a summer night when the moon is cold and clear, and Mama Hallie's mayonnaise jar with the peeling blue and white label is streaming sweat from something cold and clear that's in it, those folks — or parts of folks — rise up out of the garden patch where tomatoes and rhubarb stalks used to grow and sit down on her porch to talk a spell.

And that's how she's come to talk a lot with Red Bob's leg.

The assistant stood on Mama Hallie's porch in his ankle-length mackintosh and droopy cowboy-style hat, pleading to come in. The sagging roof over her sagging porch was leaking brown water, and cold rain trickled over the brim of his hat and underneath his collar. "But Miss Hallie — "

Mama Hallie blocked the doorway to the shanty, her arms big as ham hocks crossed over her bosom, rock-like, immovable. "Not for sale."

The assistant shivered. Water was sliding down his black raincoat and puddling in his wing-tip shoes. He was wondering who would be harder to placate — Mama Hallie, blocking the doorway to the fireplace behind her, or his boss, ensconced in a walnut-paneled office at the headquarters for the petroleum consortium that had sent him here. He pictured his boss leaning back in his swivel chair, tapping his slender, silver pen on his desk blotter, listening as he tried to explain Mama Hallie's refusal to sell and complete their buyout of Cottontree land. Then his boss would lean over to jot notes in a thick book, notes that meant the assistant's future, that silver pen clicking furiously in and out.

"Please!" He grabbed the door before she could slam it and wedged his foot in at the bottom. "Name your price to sell this property."

"Not for sale," said Mama Hallie, leaning against the door with her full weight, like a boulder precipitating an avalanche, until he thought all the bones in his foot were going to break and tried to withdraw. He jerked his leg,

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but his shoe caught in the door. With a desperate yank he freed himself, but his shoe remained, left behind the closed door with Mama Hallie. He stood on her porch for a minute with rain snaking down his back, then turned and hopped down the porch steps to his car. Only then did Mama Hallie open her door, raise one beefy arm over her head, and pitch his black, size 10CC down the steps after him.

Mama Hallie didn't need a man's shoe. After all, old Red Bob's leg already had one.

Tyler Lott leaned back into the leather seat of the corporate jet carrying him toward Cottontree Parish. At a smooth thirty thousand feet in a frosted-white sky, the ice in his highball glass barely tinkled. He sucked on a cigar and exhaled. Ash floated down onto his knee, and a passing flight attendant flicked it off with a napkin. Ignoring her, he turned to watch their descent through the cabin window, thinking with satisfaction of the jet trail of ice crystals his arrival was making across the unsuspecting sky.

"Nobody could have been more inefficient," Lott told the man sitting across the room from him. "Not only did you fail to close the deal, you antagonized her." He leaned back in the upholstered chair in his suite at the Cottontree Grande and glared at his assistant, like a scientist affixing an insect on a pin before he places a drop of fatal alcohol on the creature's head.

"Your sources were wrong," the assistant squeaked. He cleared his throat. "Folks around here say she's a voodoo woman. Collects weird stuff from the swamp. Money's no inducement."

Lott leaned back and smiled at the ceiling like a secret floated there. "Everybody wants money."

The assistant perched on the edge of his chair. Then he got up and walked to the bar, poured some bourbon into a glass emblazoned with the hotel's crest, and drank slowly. Finally he dared to say, "Everybody but her."

Lott squinted in the sunlight reflecting off the tin roof of the shack in front of him. Behind him the engine of his rental car cracked and popped as the metal contracted. He loosened his tie; already his shirt was wilting in the bayou humidity.

He knocked on Mama Hallie's door.

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It opened a fraction. He saw one brown eye, fish-like, staring suspiciously out. "Yes?"

"Hallie Defleur?"

"Folks calls me 'Mama Hallie.'"

He gave her a smile. "Mama Hallie, then. I'm Tyler Lott, from Louisiana and Arkansas petroleum."

The brown eye blinked. "One of y'all already been here."

"My assistant inadequately represented our intentions. May I?" He shouldered in.

"Guess you won't leave till you've heard no, too." Mama Hallie opened the door.

His pupils adjusted painfully to the dark interior. He saw one room with a fireplace and a lumpy, battered sofa covered with an afghan crocheted in blocks of pink, green, and mustard yellow. Two rocking chairs sat by a fireplace which smelled rancid and smoky. Above the soot-blackened stones of the hearth a mantel hung at a precarious angle. Curious, he eyed her collection of things on the mantel. There was a jar of dried cat's tails, a branch with dead leaves, and three bottles filled with a liquid the color of iodine. He stared. On the mantel sat three small, bleached-white skulls, some kind of swamp creatures with pointed snouts and tiny, sharp teeth. Moles? he wondered. Shrews? Possums or even house cats?

Mama Hallie was moving out of the room and into the kitchen beyond. "Want some iced tea?" she asked, wiping her hands on her skirt. "Humidity makes you-all sweat, don't it?"

He glanced around. The kitchen linoleum was caked with dirt, grease streaked the squatty refrigerator and stove top, but he dared not insult her. "I'd love some."

He sat gingerly in a rocking chair while she cracked trays of ice and poured tea into two mayonnaise jars, sloshing it over the sides and onto the floor as she handed him one. He sipped. "Delicious." Surprisingly, it *was* delicious. Cold, bracing, smelling of mint and lemon.

"Now, what you want, Mr. Lott?"

"Mama Hallie, you're living here alone."

She nodded.

"You are — shall we say, a certain age?" He tried to size her up, but she might have been fifty or seventy. Her face was cantaloupe-round, crisscrossed

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with wrinkles, but her hair was black. He continued. "One day you'll need assistance. With cooking, perhaps. Or housekeeping." He bent over the mayonnaise jar, smothering a laugh at his joke. "We want to develop your land. We've bought out everyone else, and we're prepared to offer you the same attractive deal your neighbors have gotten." He leaned back and crossed his legs, resting his arms on the arms of the rocker, reasonable, friendly, warm.

"Not my land." She smiled.

He wiped his forehead with his sleeve. The cold tea seemed to be making him hotter. "The courthouse books — "

"Books don't make things so." She swigged at her jar.

He looked around for a place to put his mayonnaise jar and giving up, set it on the floor between his feet. He leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees, his eyes level with hers. "Okay, Mama Hallie. What do you want?"

"Got all I need," she said. She turned her eyes toward the mantel. "Now, I collect things." Her gaze shifted back to him. "Stuff the swamp's through with, like after a wolf's ate some animal and coughs up feathers and bones. I collect what the swamp don't want."

The inside of his mouth felt like cotton. "You want something for your collection? In trade, for your property? I'll make it worth your while."

She smiled. "Told you, property don't belong to me. Folks think we own land. We don't. It tolerates us, till it's had enough, then earthquake or fire comes along, swallows everybody up."

"Those are natural disasters, Mama Hallie." He tried to restrain his anger. "You think we're some plague of corporate locusts, come to desecrate your land? Well, earthquakes and fires happen even to 'good' people." He watched her eyes. "And we'll make something good out of this land. Drain it, produce petroleum products that enhance peoples' lives. What's a swamp worth to anybody?"

She drained the tea from her jar and leaned forward in her chair, too, her brown eyes unblinking and her breath sweet-smelling, like peppermint, in his face. "People got this idea a thing's got to be worth this, worth that. Some things just are. Leave this swamp alone." She stood up. "Time for you to go, I reckon."

"Get something on her," Lott told his assistant. They sat across the table from each other over breakfast on the hotel veranda. "Everybody has a price."

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He buttered a slice of burnt toast angrily, scattering crumbs.

"There's nothing," his assistant said. "Just a voodoo woman, like I told you. Barters for what she needs by doctoring the locals."

"What kind of doctoring?"

"Folk-medicine stuff. Poultice for an ingrown toenail, herbal tea for a headache, that kind of thing. She was born on that land. She'll die there, before she sells."

Lott broke the overdone toast in half and threw it down onto his plate. He reached for a basket of fresh breads on the table. "Whatever," he said, spearing a blueberry muffin with his knife so that the berries bled purple juice.

"I'm your man," said the man with gray hair combed carefully over his balding head. He slouched in the upholstered chair in the hotel room as though unaccustomed to comfort. Leaning back, he propped his fingertips together, cathedral-like, watching through half-closed eyes. He smelled faintly of kerosene.

Lott opened his wallet and flicked three bills into the man's lap. The man did not move. Only his eyes changed, lizard-like, as if an inner eyelid had closed briefly over them. Lott made a disgusted sound and flicked another bill at him. The man picked up the bills one by one, wafting them past his nose, before he stuffed them into his jeans.

"You know what to do?"

"It's my business. You're paying for a professional." The man got up to go. At the door he turned around. "You must be desperate, man, burning an old lady for a few lousy acres."

Lott allowed a smile to break across his face, like a crack in a frozen lake in a false spring, before winter surges back. "That's *not* your business."

The man shrugged and walked out, leaving the door open. Lott closed it behind him. Then he looked down at his hand and shuddered. The door knob was slick with a film of grease.

He woke two days later to the shrill of the telephone in his room. Groggy, he sat upright in bed and fumbled for the receiver.

"It's still there," said a voice on the other end of the line.

Lott yanked the clock from the bedside table and held it close to his face in the darkness. Fluorescent green numbers pulsed on and off slowly. "It's three A.M. What the hell are you talking about?"

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The line was silent for a minute. Then the assistant said, "The shack. He didn't show. He split with the money."

Lott squeezed the clock in his hand as if it were an egg he could crush in his fingers. Then he pitched it across the room in the darkness. It slammed into the far wall and fell to the floor, its soft green numbers throbbing at him from the other side of the room, confused, upside down.

The voice spoke again. "You want I should go down to the waterfront, find another torch?"

Lott hung up on him. You want a thing done right, he thought savagely, you do it yourself.

LOTT EASED the nose of the rental car deep into the brush along the roadside. Branches scraped the doors, like fingernails on a blackboard. He raked through a bag on the seat beside him, finding a tin of black shoe polish that he smeared across his forehead and cheeks and nose, war paint-style, then opened the car door and got out, swinging the bag over his shoulder.

He crept along the road until he saw the shack rising before him like a shadow under the full moon. The assistant had done his part tonight; the shack was empty, Mama Hallie on a fool's mission to answer a call for doctoring miles away.

It was easy to enter. He'd bought a tool from one of the stooges along the waterfront to pick the lock, but there was no lock at all; the handle turned on the first try and he walked in. He leaned against the door for a minute, listening. Nothing. The white skulls gleamed on the mantel like moths against the screen. He tiptoed past them into the kitchen.

The refrigerator hummed behind him as he passed from the kitchen into the bedroom. In the moonlight through the window, he could make out a thin mattress covered by a quilt. He opened another door. A closet. This was it, then. Three matchbox-sized rooms and a closet to call home. This, worth any price she would have asked. He felt anger bloom in his heart. He knelt in her bedroom and lit the pot bought from the thugs along the waterfront. There was a hiss, like gas escaping from a balloon, and then an eruption of the blue flame and sparks. Lott jumped to his feet and ran out of the house.

He ran, crouching, across the yard and slid down the bank to the swamp. At the water's edge he turned to watch. The curtains at the window swayed

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as the fire from the pot pulled oxygen from the shack. He saw a blue glow. In a moment, he glimpsed the refrigerator through the window, illuminated by low flames creeping through the house. He heard the tin roof buckling from the rising heat.

He was sweating, and he licked his lips and tasted salt and a bitter taste, like rubber. Wiping his forehead, forgetting the shoe polish, he was startled to see his blackened hand come down in front of his eyes.

The night was hot. Frogs stopped croaking and insects stopped buzzing. Maybe, he thought, they were listening to the sounds of the fire eating. The flames were sucking now, popping, crackling, chewing. They burned and ate along the pine flooring of the shack. Nails and rivets popped and snapped out of tin and wood, and he sat down at the edge of the swamp to wait for the finale.

Then he heard another sound, a hissing, like water droplets on a hot frying pan. Then he heard soft plops in the swamp around him, as if an army of invisible frogs had leapt in unison into the dark water at his feet. He looked up. Rain. A cloud had rolled across the moon, and it was raining.

Rain. It fell in sheets, then in buckets. The flames inching through the shack were beaten back, smothered. He watched steam curl out of the blackened timbers, spin out and away from the windows. The fire sputtered and died as he wondered how much damage he had done, if he had done enough to drive her away.

It was over in minutes. Wind scuttled the pale clouds, blowing the rain away, and Lott shivered. He remembered the car hidden up the road. The assistant, he thought. He'd send him to find another bum to do the job. They all had a price. He turned to go.

As he climbed the rain-slick bank, he stumbled and fell face-down, sliding back down the bank and into the water before he recovered himself. He got up onto his hands and knees. Although he was near the bank, the water was surprisingly deep, almost to his elbows. He tried to stand, but something under the water had snared him around his ankle. He managed to balance on one leg for a minute, hopping, then tried to drag the caught leg behind him toward the bank.

Impossible. Lassoed like a calf in a rodeo, he fell. He groped underwater, squeezing cold mud between his fingers. Whatever was holding him eluded him; he felt only slick weeds and grasses that floated, snake-like, in the

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smelly water. He sat down in the water, his heart pounding with fear. It occurred to him how dangerous this was, this game played outside hotel rooms and corporate offices.

He tried to stand again, and the thing kept its hold. Panicked, he grappled underwater, clawing, struggling. Something dragged him back.

He rolled over, staring down into the dark water. One hand burned. Holding it up, he saw his fingers were ripped and bleeding. He kicked like a mule, but the thing kept its grip.

He lay still, fighting fear. Nearby he heard wings rushing out of treetops. Desperately he thought of snakes and alligators. He was afraid he would die there in the darkness, and he leaned back to pace his breathing. A few white stars emerged in the clearing heavens.

He was not the kind of man to believe in things unseen, but he whispered, "Let me go, and I won't come back."

He could not say how much time went by. Finally he heard a voice, and he strained to look down Mama Hallie's dirt drive. At the end of the drive a light swung back and forth; a lantern, he guessed. Somebody was coming down the road. I'm saved, he thought with a rush of relief, and then, I'm lost.

Mama Hallie's bulk disengaged itself from the darkness and appeared on the bank, illuminated by the phosphorescent water. Turning, she looked at the smoldering shack. Then she put down her lantern and waded into the water, holding out her hand. "Caught in that old barbed wire, ain't you?" she said.

Lott lay on his back, staring at the swirls of paint in the stippled ceiling of his room, trying to make sense of the pattern. He thought about who might have painted these ceilings. When he'd been a young man, he'd wanted to be an artist. Once he'd bought a glossy book about Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He'd wondered what was in Michelangelo's mind as he lay on his back all day, paint dripping in his eyes, seeing the whole majestic mosaic of his work in his mind's eye while his physical eye could focus only on a small patch of plaster directly overhead. Lott tried to focus on the workmanship of his life, on the larger picture of his career and ambition. He tried to imagine his worth to his corporation, to his family, to himself. But worth was a word as light as air, as empty as a shadow,without weight or meaning, and he could see only the stippled ceiling above his bed in this New Orleans hospital.

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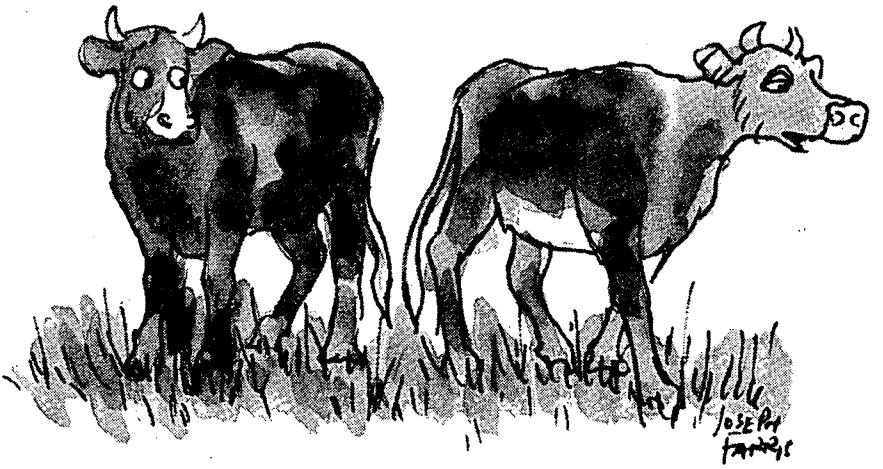
His doctor came in that afternoon to wrap a fresh bandage around Lott's lower leg and worked without speaking, shaking his head when he was finished. Lott watched the doctor's face intently. Then he turned to stare out the window of his room. He didn't need to ask what he already knew. His leg smelled just like swamp water, the foul, sick odor of things rotting. Gangrene.

Things go on much the same as before on the bayou of the Louisiana swamp. Mosquitoes sing and bull gators honk on a summer's night. Mama Hallie sits on her front porch and rocks, the new pine planks of the porch groaning under her weight.

Summer still brings rain to Cottontree Parish. After a heavy storm, the nearby river swells and overruns its banks, flooding the local graveyard until it sometimes floats a coffin downstream. When Mama Hallie finds a coffin, she carts it down to her old garden spot and re-buries it there, as is fitting and proper for Louisiana folks. Of a night when the moon grows full, some of the inhabitants of those coffins join other ghostly apparitions who pass the time on Mama Hallie's porch. They pass the time as she rocks, sipping from her mayonnaise jar full of cold, clear "swamp water," talking to old Red Bob's legs.



"Don't moo me. I'll moo you."

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When former F&SF editor Avram Davidson died in 1993, he left a treasure trove of his delightful fiction. Buried in the pile was "Sacrifice." We're pleased to have the story, but sad that it is among the last of the new Avram Davidson works.

Sacrifice

By Avram Davidson

THEY STARTED TO GATHER at six o'clock. Sonya, who always got there first, at once went into the kitchen and made coffee, so there was a hot cup ready for Slauson's elderly cousin Willis when she arrived with the cakes and cookies. Ava came by and by and of course told them that she wanted nothing to eat or drink, but she was already contentedly eating and drinking when Arno drove up with, "my dears, *the* most *succulent* roast turkey (already sliced) which I have ever *made* and *you*. Have ever *tasted*! — and *where* is our dear old Slauson, may I ask," he demanded, setting down the vast plate.

"Where should he be?" asked Heimberger, striding in with wine and whiskey and filling the place with his vast bulk. "Upstairs, inserting semicolons in this year's epic opus: can a publisher sell semicolons? I have probably lost a thousand dollars for his every semicolon over the past twenty years! But I still have faith." His huge hairy fingers reached out and captured a glazed turkey-wing.

So they were all there when Farmer came in, pretending to shield his eyes and scout around. "And where is this year's or shall I say this month's

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Slauson's new friend? Hello Heimberger, Sonya, Ava, Amo, Willis.... This time I drove five hundred miles to the reading, so it better be good, although," he lowered his voice, "I'm afraid it won't."

Willis, her voice by now almost quavering, so old she was, "Oh shame on you, Farmer. Shame on you."

"If he didn't waste *his* time and your *money*, Willie, on those so-called new friends of his," Ava began.

Amo didn't wait for her to finish. "Well, Slauson *will* just want to live in a house by the side of the *road* and be a friend to man and woman. They leech *on*to him, they *drain* him, they are *off*, one never *sees* them again, and then poor *Slau*son tries to *write*. And *tries* aannd *tries*...." He sighed, said, "A *teeny* taste of that cake, Willis. *Oh*. OH. *It*, is, so, *goood*! Willis, where do you *buy* — "

Slauson came in just at that moment.

"Are you all right, dear?" asked Ada. "You seem a trifle — "

"It is nothing," said Slauson. "I was in the cellar burying a body."

"Of your dead past, no doubt?"

Everybody chuckled empathetically and when the chuckles had quite died away Slauson cleared his throat and began to read.

He read for half an hour. He read for an hour. He read for an hour and a half. No one coughed. No one lit a cigarette. No one did anything connected with water. Slauson read for one hour and fifty-seven minutes. When he had done, the silence still went on.

Then Sonya began to scream and when the scream was understood to be "*Bravo*!" others joined her. Willie clapped her splayed arthritic paws. Ava kissed him repeatedly. Arno murmured passionate impossible murmurs in his ears; and Heimberger, mustache wet with tears, could only mutter, brokenly, "...morrow...contract...advance...greatest...escalator clause third hundred thousand...."

Finally Farmer's dry, critic's voice, slightly husky now, was heard to say, " — worth *any* sacrifice: For having written *that*, an entire life is not too much to have given!"

Hear, hear! they all cried, Willis thumping her cane on the floor.

Hear, hear!

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We are delighted to have Laurel Winter, who has written a number of stories for our pages, return this month. In addition to writing full time, Laurel raises twins. Boys. Yet she still finds time to travel (Australia was the site of her family's most recent vacation), and volunteer for a variety of causes.

"I was thinking about the point in some twins' lives when they begin to see themselves as separate beings," she writes. "Then there was this idea about permanent paint..."

Hmmm. Perhaps that's why this story appealed to us now.

Permanent Natural Boy

By Laurel Winter

NINE YEARS OLD. BROTHER and sister. More than that. Somehow, on an atomic or subatomic level, unaffected by the differences in hair color (his was ruddy, hers streaky blonde) and size (she had two inches and five pounds on him) and sex, they were identical twins.

At least that's what they felt, and that's what they told everyone. Young children and dumber adults — those who didn't understand the difference between mono- and di-zygotic twinning — even believed them. They certainly acted alike, thought alike, talked alike.

They didn't have to consult one another, or rely on a psychic bond, to dress alike. Just dip into the shirt drawer and drag out one of eight identical — except for distinguishing stains — red-and-white striped shirts. Faded jeans — not stonewashed so much as gravel-scraped — in the appropriate size. Or not. He sometimes wore hers, belt cinched, dragging at the back of black canvas Keds. Whatever. Whenever.

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Their mother (classic single parent with delinquent ex-spouse) had neither time nor money to defeat their identical decisions. She'd given up years before. Even grandparents, faced with the waste of unworn choices, bowed to them with red-and-white striped shirts, Wrangler jeans. Or, more frequently, small gifts of money.

They'd heard (overheard) many discussions on the possible causes of their bond. Their names? Madeleine and Matthew, Maddy and Matt for short. The fact that their mother used to dress them alike and call them "the twins"? The tiny apartment that insisted even at the advanced age of nine they share a room? Bunk beds, one dresser, hardly enough room to spin around.

They were identical twins, all right. An unsplittable atom, an uncuttable string, alike in every way that mattered.

Such as curiosity.

When the old woman across the street came out feet first — slowly, no hurry — on a stretcher, they were hiding in the hedge along her driveway. They saw the dead hand flop out from under the sheet when the paramedics bumped their load down the steps. They tried the door after the ambulance putted away, just in case. If one of them had the idea, the other reached for the doorknob, blended, tangled together. Years later, neither of them would ever be able to remember an individual part in the event. *They* opened the door. *They* entered the dead woman's house.

They found the stacks of Harlequin romances, the empty boxes from Domino's pizza, the dead cat.

It had been arranged on a filthy silk pillow near the fireplace, eyes open a slit, ribs defined through the tabby fur, legs like sticks. "Poor thing," they said, in the same breath, kneeling down near — but not touching — the desiccated corpse. "Poor little thing."

They decided, eyes brimming over, that such a thing would not be allowed to happen again. They would see to that, looking through windows, spying on the new occupants of the house, alert for hints of insanity, cruelty, or imminent death. And then, just to be sure they could get in and remedy any future problems, they swiped the key to the back garage door from a keyring in the kitchen. Just one key, not the whole bunch, nothing anyone would notice.

Just one key. Not two halves, not something that could be divided so the two parts that made them could each carry some. One key. Maddy stuck it

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in her pocket. Then they were gone, running through "their" door in the garage. Except Maddy had to stop and lock it behind her. Matt squeezed through the hedge first, waited on the other side, hissing for her to hurry.

For a while, they took turns carrying the key. After all, identical pockets, right? A professional cleaning crew spent a couple days in the house. The two of them, watching from the hedge again, wondered which of the many garbage bags held the cat. Somewhere in there, they got mixed up, each thinking the other had the key. It went through the wash in Matt's jean pocket.

Actually in Maddy's, for that was one of the days he had worn her jeans. The next time she put them on, poking her hands down into the pockets to flatten and smooth them out, the key scraped her skin. That was it, she decided, closing her fingers around the bit of metal. She was going to be in charge of the key from now on. It could have fallen out in the wash. Their mother could have found it.

Matt didn't care. As long as one of them had it, he told her, it didn't matter which one did. By that time, a "For Sale" sign stood in the front yard of the house across the street. People toured the house under the gushing attention of a woman in a pukey gold jacket — and the watchful eyes of two hidden children in red-and-white shirts.

Sometimes, they didn't hide. They pretended to play jacks or hopscotch (detestable games) on the sidewalk in front of their apartment building, making random moves while they scanned the potential purchasers.

"Yuck," they breathed to one another. (Two men wearing business attire and carrying their own personal copies of *The Wall Street Journal.*)

"Gross." (A couple with a new baby in a reeking diaper — by the time they left the house, a rim of brown was oozing out one leghole.)

"All right." (A family with a kid about their age.)

But none of those people bought the house. Three different sets of potential buyers had inspected the house (and been inspected by them) the day the gold jacket woman put "Sold" on the sign, so Maddy and Matt didn't know who the buyer was until the woman started moving in.

She hadn't been anywhere near their first choice, but she was far from the most hideous of the potential buyers. One woman, no family, no pets that they could see. "Drat," Maddy whispered. "Now who are we going to protect?" The key felt dull and heavy in her pocket.

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The woman wore bright colors that didn't necessarily go together, but somehow seemed right. Or almost right. "Maybe she's kind of crazy," Matt said, a hopeful note in his voice. "Maybe we'll have to keep an eye on her. She looks kind of weird."

Maddy shrugged. In green sweatpants, a brilliant purple shirt, and yellow socks — even glittery shoelaces in her black running shoes — the woman did look strange. But not crazy.

They were using the jump-rope disguise that day, standing side by side on their sidewalk, jumping in tandem, facing in the direction of the house and the woman and the moving van. The movers were talking about them, they could tell from the way the men looked over their shoulders and laughed. The woman smiled at them a few times, in a distracted sort of way, in between directing men with boxes and chairs and other pieces of furniture.

They had decided, earlier that morning, not to be too friendly right away. So they didn't smile back, although Maddy felt as if she might like to. She thought the woman looked interesting, even if you ignored her clothes. For one thing, her hair was the exact color of butterscotch pudding, pulled into a skinny braid that dribbled down the back of her purple shirt. For another, she had a really wide mouth that seemed to naturally fall into at least half a smile. Was her hair really that color, Maddy wondered, or did she dye it? It would be interesting to meet a grownup who *wanted* to have hair that looked like butterscotch. It was such a delicious color.

She was so intent on the woman that she didn't notice Matt had stopped jumping until he grabbed her rope and made her trip. "Ow," she said. "Quit it."

"I'm bored," he said. "Let's do something else."

Maddy let him talk her into the park, with the promise that they'd watch again in the afternoon.

For several weeks, they conducted surveillance. They noticed when the woman rode her bike off in the mornings — for work, they assumed — and when she returned. They looked in every window of the house. Particularly the window in the back of the garage.

Through it, they could see that the woman had no car, that the garage looked messy but not dirty, that there was a flashlight on the workbench near the door.

The first night they had planned on inspecting the garage, nothing

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seemed to go right. First, their mother stayed up late watching some movie. Maddy fell asleep waiting for the TV sounds to stop. She was dreaming that they were approaching the garage when Matt shook her awake. She socked him blindly. "Sorry," she muttered, when she realized what and when and who. "You scared me."

There was another scare, too, as they eased the front door of the apartment building open. Someone was crouched in the middle of the street, in spite of the hour. Matt pulled the door closed again, holding the knob and turning it to avoid even a click. Then they ran back upstairs, only semi-quietly, back into their own apartment. They made their way to the living room window on hands and knees and peered over the sill at the street below.

Although the butterscotch hair was bleached into a neutral color by the street lights, they recognized the woman. She held a paint brush and a shiny can, and she was going over the faded yellow lines in the center of the street with a smooth motion, covering them with new, slick yellow. Crouch, paint, step to the next line. They watched her until she was out of their view, still painting, and then they went back to bed.

The next day, they argued about when to try again. Maddy thought they should do it right away; Matt wanted to wait, to spy some more first, to see what else she was up to. "She's done painting," Maddy pointed out. "And anyway, she's probably tired from staying up so late last night. She'll go to bed early tonight."

"Yeah, maybe," said Matt. He looked a little tired himself.

"Scared?" teased Maddy.

He flashed her a dirty look, but he didn't argue anymore.

They pretended they were asleep when their mother came in to kiss them that night. Maddy heard her whisper, "Good night, love," to Matt, up on the top bunk. She waited, eyes lightly closed, in the cave created by Matt's bed. Feathery touch of her mother's fingers on her cheek. "Good night, sweetie." Light kiss. Blanket adjusted under her chin. Maddy had to fight to keep a smile from escaping, to stifle a nervous giggle. Then the door closed. They were alone.

Scritch of springs above her as Matt changed positions. "Good night, sweetie," he whispered, in a mock falsetto. "Good night, love," she returned, almost reluctantly. It wasn't really a joke, after all, that their mother loved them.

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Matt's legs — still in jeans — appeared over the edge of the bunk. He quietly twisted around and lowered himself to the floor, avoiding the creaky ladder. Maddy sat up, letting the blanket fall away from her striped shirt. "We'd better wait a little while," she murmured.

They sat, side by side, on Maddy's bed, listening to the sounds of water running in the bathroom, the toilet flushing, the muffled tones of the newscaster from their mother's bedside clock/radio. Then silence.

They waited still, as the silence in their apartment grew until it had encompassed the building, the street. Nodding to one another in the darkness, they crept to the door with the silence peculiar to kids in black canvas Keds, each step quieter than the last, their black shoes invisible, inaudible in the night.

Maddy stopped in the doorway and slid one hand into a pocket, even though she knew the key would be there. Then she went on, one step behind her twin, past furniture that revealed its weariness even to the curtain-muffled street lights.

Outside, they dashed across the street and melted into the hedge. They had never been in the hedge during the night before. Blackened twigs caught at their shirts, the skin of their arms, their hair. The woman's house was dark. "Let's go in now," said Matt, in a voice no louder than a branch reaching for its neighbor.

Maddy nodded and broke from the hedge, dashing for the deep shadow at the side of the garage. When Matt joined her, breathing more deeply than the short distance warranted, they sidled along the garage.

When Maddy reached the end of the wall, she half expected someone to be waiting for them around the corner, the woman or a psycho killer or something not even human, made of darkness. "Go on," hissed Matt, poking her in the back. She stumbled forward, into the empty back yard. "Unlock the door," he said.

She pulled the key from her pocket and inserted it into the dark slit in the knob.

The key didn't make a sound, and neither did the doorknob. Maddy felt the door give to her slight pressure. She let the knob move back to its original position and pushed the door slowly open.

The threshold was the worst part, with the shadowy yard behind them and the dark garage, open like a mouth, before. They both stood for a moment.

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Then Matt reached past her, clutching her arm with his other hand, and grabbed the flashlight from the workbench.

The pale circle of light made the decision for them. "Someone might see us," Maddy gasped, closing the door behind them.

Matt swept the light slowly around, keeping it below the level of the window. Objects came into existence, disappeared. A bicycle helmet, a muddy garden trowel, a half-empty bag of potting soil, shiny cans with dribbles of color. "Stop," said Maddy, when the light traveled past the cans, and illuminated a pair of snow shoes. "That must be what she was painting the street with."

Matt swung the light back to the cans, then played it on the garage floor, creating a path to the shelves that held the cans. They stepped over patches of ancient oil, splotches of brilliant paint.

The cans had hand-lettered labels. *Permanent Day-Glow Pink. Permanent White. Permanent Highway Department Yellow.* And a larger can, dented and scratched, with dried trickles of a clear substance down its sides. That one bore just one word on its label: *Base.* "It's just paint," said Matt.

"Then why was she out in the middle of the night?" asked Maddy. "Let's open one of them up." She picked up *Permanent Day-Glow Pink* and gave it a shake.

Matt positioned the flashlight so its beam illuminated a triangle of shelf. He took a screwdriver from an empty chili can and started prying the lid off the can Maddy had chosen.

The can had obviously not been opened in a while. "Here," said Maddy. "Let me try." She grabbed the screwdriver from Matt's hand. With all her strength, she levered the tip at the edge of the can.

The lid flew off amid a spatter of pink droplets. It hit Matt's cheek with a liquid plop, clung for a second, and slid down onto his shirt.

Matt let out half a shriek, which he quickly stifled. Maddy caught the lid in mid-air, before it could clatter to the concrete floor. "Ssshhh," she said, slapping the lid down on the can, covering the pool of pink.

They stood there, holding their breaths and listening. Silence. Silence. But then, just as they released the trapped air and let their shoulders drop, footsteps.

Maddy reached out one finger and hit the button on the flashlight. Her last sight before the world disappeared was Matt's face, not comic in spite of the circle of bright pink covering one cheek.

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Step. Silence. Step. They reached out to each other and sank into a crouch, not daring to move in the darkness. Before their eyes had a chance to adjust, the door from the house opened, letting a rectangle of light spill into the garage. Maddy saw a hand reach into the garage and flick a switch upward.

Afterward, she could never remember if she, or Matt — or both of them — had screamed or if there had been only a dreadful silence as the woman discovered them.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the woman. "How did you get in?"

The children crouched down further. Matt looked over his shoulder at the woman, and the woman let out a shriek that could have been the unvoiced half of his own. "Shit! What have you done?"

She ran toward them on bare feet and grabbed Matt's chin, pulling him into a standing position. Maddy followed him up. "Shit, shit, shit," said the woman. "You little idiots."

Tears leaked out of her light brown eyes. She gave Matt's chin a shake and released it, swiping her arm across her own face.

The tears scared Maddy more than anything. Paint wasn't a tragedy — was it? Matt looked as if he were about to start crying. He would hate that, she knew. "We can wash it off," she said, voice wobbling.

"No."

"We'll do it at home then," she said, angry now. "Come on, Matt." She took his arm and started for the door.

"No," said the woman again, grabbing Matt's other arm, stopping their progress. "I didn't mean 'no, you can't use my sink.'" She glared at them. "I meant 'no, it is not possible for you to physically remove that paint.' It's permanent. As in forever." She dropped Matt's arm.

They just stood there. Matt reached two fingers up to his cheek — slowly. "Hey," he said, "it feels okay."

Maddy touched the painted skin of her brother's cheek and felt normal skin. "What's going on?" she whispered.

The woman gulped in some air. "It's permanent paint," she said. "Doesn't wash off, no solvent — it just becomes part of whatever it touches." She, too, reached out to Matt's cheek.

Matt whipped his head away. "Leave me alone," he said. He and Maddy gave her their meanest look, the one they'd practiced in the bathroom mirror

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until they had the identical furl of eyebrow, clench of jaw.

The woman backed up a step. "Fine," she said. "Did I ask you to break into my garage and mess with something you had no business with?" She spun around and headed back toward the door.

Maddy's bravado faltered. What if they couldn't get it off themselves. "Please," she said. "You have to help."

For a moment, she wasn't sure if the woman was going to stop. Then she did, her back stiff beneath its straggle of butterscotch hair. "Please," Matt said.

Washing — as predicted — accomplished nothing. Maddy, snooping through an open cabinet in the bathroom, said, "What about this?" She held out an old jar of foundation.

"I'm not wearing makeup," Matt said, from his perch on the closed toilet lid. "No way."

"You'd rather look like a clown?" Maddy asked.

The woman grabbed the jar from her and swabbed a dab on Matt's cheek while they were arguing. "Hold still or I'll get some in your eye," she told him. She smeared it around on the pink circle. "Better," she said, sighing, "but still not good." The pink glowed from beneath the coating of tan. "Besides, I kind of doubt that makeup would last more than a couple minutes on a boy. You'd need something a little more...." Her voice trailed off.

Maddy and Matt looked up at her, waiting for the sentence to finish. Instead, she stood up and ran from the bathroom. "Come on," she yelled from the kitchen. The door into the garage banged.

When they got out there, she was pouring *base* into a new shiny can. "Come here," she commanded Matt. "Sit in the light." She grabbed his face between her hands and stared closely at it, paying particular attention to the unpainted cheek. Then she started dripping colors from vials into the base, stirring with a dowel. Every once in a while, she held the dowel up next to Matt's cheek, comparing the glistening painted wood to the color of his skin.

The first few times she did this, she said nothing, just grunted and added some more color to the mixture. Maddy could hardly breathe. It had to work. Anything was better than that pink. Finally, the woman judged the match and said, "Almost."

Maddy jumped up to look. She narrowed her eyes. "Maybe," she said doubtfully.

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"Well," snapped the woman, "it's not going to be exact. And it's hard to tell when the paint is wet and shiny. It won't dry like this."

"It just looks more like a doll's skin," said Maddy, defending her doubts. "Not like a real person."

The woman tilted her head, considering. "You're right," she said. "What we have here is *Permanent Doll Face.* What we need is *Permanent Natural Boy.* So what makes a boy different from a doll?"

"Dirt," said Maddy. Matt kicked her. "Sweat."

"Dirt I can manage," said the woman, sending a shower of dust from the edge of a shelf into the paint. "Sweat you'll have to add yourself." She held up the dowel near Matt's face again.

It was still slick and shiny, but somehow Maddy could tell it was the right color — or as close to right as anyone was going to get. "Yes," she said.

"Close your eyes," the woman told Matt, picking up a small paintbrush. He drew back a little. "You'd rather go around like you are now?"

"No," he said. He squinched his eyes shut, as much, Maddy guessed, to control a suspicious glimmer of tears, as because he'd been told to.

The woman dipped the brush into the paint and swirled it around. The paint glimmered. Maddy felt her insides compress into tight balls. It had to work. It just had to. The woman stroked the brush over Matt's painted cheek, covering the *Permanent Day-Glow Pink* with *Permanent Natural Boy.* A few tears squeezed out of Matt's eyes and mingled with the paint. "Quit crying — I don't know what effect it will have on the paint."

He stopped, his jaw quivering. The woman finished covering the splotch and stood back. "You know," she said, "it's not going to match the other cheek perfectly." And before Matt could say anything, she reached out with the brush and began painting his other cheek.

Maddy yelped. Matt didn't move. And it did look better when she was done. Except then the nose didn't match....

In the end, she painted his whole face, even the eyelids. Maddy held his hair back while his forehead dried. Her face felt numb, as if it had been painted. Would their mother notice? Would they get in trouble?

When she could let his hair fall against his forehead and look at him from a little distance, she knew that their mother would not notice. No one would, except her. Matt ran into the house to look in the bathroom mirror. Maddy brushed one hand against her eyes.

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The woman grabbed her wrist, turned the hand palm upward. "Look," she said.

Bright pink smudged the tips of three fingers. From when she'd caught the lid, Maddy guessed.

"So what do you want?" the woman asked, cocking her head toward the cans. "*Day-Glow Pink* or *Permanent Natural Boy*?"

Maddy pointed one of the offended fingers at the newest can of permanent paint. With the edge of the brush, the woman touched up her fingers, covering the pink and then stroking down and painting the palm of Maddy's right hand so it would be uniform. "Do you want me to do the other hand?" she asked. "It's probably not that big of a deal. Your hands won't always be side by side, not like your brother's cheeks."

"Can you do my face?" Maddy asked.

The woman hesitated, shook her head. "I don't think that would be a good idea," she said. "Your skin color isn't quite the same as your brother's."

Maddy wanted to say, "but we're identical twins," but the words glued themselves to the roof of her mouth.

Matt bounded into the garage. "Hey, thanks," he said.

The woman nodded soberly. "You're welcome. Now, please — " her voice tightened " — stay out of my garage and my paints."

"But where did you get the paints?" Maddy asked. "And how can they last forever? Who makes them?" Now that the crisis was taken care of, she was consumed with curiosity.

"It's none of your business," the woman said flatly.

"It is too," said Maddy. She pointed at Matt's face. "How do we know what that will do to him?"

Matt turned pale beneath his coat of paint. "This won't hurt me, will it?"

The woman hissed something that was probably a swear word. "Okay. It's a special type of paint. It won't hurt you. You can't buy it in stores. It — "

"Then where do you get it?" Maddy asked again.

"Don't interrupt me," the woman snapped. "I have a friend, an...inventor. He makes it."

"Why doesn't he sell it in the stores?" Matt asked. "He'd get rich."

"It's complicated," the woman said. "You couldn't make the paints in factories. And even if you could, would you want just anybody to have access

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to them? Vandals? Gang members? Little kids?" She looked pointedly at them.

Maddy flushed. "We're sorry," she muttered. "We didn't know."

"Fine. You didn't know and you still got into trouble. What if you had known? What if you were the type of people who painted swastikas and swear words on the windows of a Jewish family? Horrible things that couldn't be scraped off."

Matt opened his mouth again. "Yeah, but — "

"Enough," the woman said. "Just get out of here."

The two of them headed for the door. "Is your hair really that color?" Maddy blurted out, stopping for a second. "Or did you paint it?"

"I painted it," said the woman. She gave Maddy half a smile.

Matt was gone by now, into the darkness. "I thought so," said Maddy. She walked through the door, closing it behind her. The key protruded from the knob; Maddy slipped it into her pocket.

"Hey, Maddy," her brother called quietly from around the corner, "did you get the key?"

She rested her painted hand over her pocket for a moment. "No," she whispered back, "she must have taken it."

"Rats. Race you to the house."

They plunged off through the shadows along the hedge, darted across the street. Maddy touched the door first, with her right hand. Then she opened it, and they sneaked to their room.

THE WOMAN'S brief, incomplete explanation was not enough. They still spent time in the hedges and trees, using secret hand signals and flashing mirror codes. They still cased the house, peering through the windows, even taking an occasional instant picture if their mom left the Polaroid camera lying around.

They saw her bike away with an empty backpack and return with one that looked bulgy and heavy. They saw her painting in the midnight street again. They went through her garbage and found letters from a man who informed her he was improving the base and had developed a color called "Permanent Concrete Gray" that seemed to repel graffiti. There was no return address on the envelopes. At times, Maddy was tempted to confess

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that she still had the key, but to do that she would have had to admit that she'd lied about it before. So they stayed on the outside, doing plenty of looking in.

She did go back to the garage once, a year later, when Matt had been invited to a birthday party and she hadn't. That had happened before, but they'd always wangled an invitation for the other. This time, Matt had informed her, shuffling his Keds, it was just going to be guys.

The garage looked different in the afternoon, with dusty light filtering through the window. The woman's bike and helmet were gone. Maddy headed straight for the paint cans and picked up *Permanent Natural Boy*. She tilted it back and forth, guessing how much was left. Quite a bit, she thought.

She set the can on the shelf and compared the palms of her hands. Different, but not much. Her right hand was no dirtier than her left, but the dirt looked more integral, more a part of the hand, more that it was supposed to be that way. Some of the dirt was from her bike, she knew, or from climbing the fence in back of the apartment, but some of it was painted on. Never-come-offable. Permanent.

She touched the lid of the can with one finger. Then she left it on the shelf, not exactly where she had found it. She almost left the key, too, but in the end she put it back in her pocket. That was around the time they stopped wearing the red-and-white shirts. One of the last seamless, shared decisions.

When they grew up, people never mistook them for identical twins — or for twins at all. They always assumed Matt was younger by a year or three. One of his women friends confided to Maddy that he looked like a little boy who'd forgotten to wash his face — or maybe he had, but he hadn't done a very good job. A little boy who still knew how to cry when he got hurt.

Maddy gave a neutral smile, one she'd practiced alone in the mirror. She rubbed the palms of her hands together, feeling the sameness beneath the difference. "Yeah, he's just a big kid," she said. "Aren't we all."

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

It Was the Blessed of Times, It Was the Cursed of Times

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Hester Prynne, impregnated by Satan in the form of a randy televangelist named Arthur Dimmesdale, gives birth to a unnatural daughter portended to usher in Armageddon on her sixteenth birthday. Dismayed by the monster she has brought into the world, Hester commits suicide by carving the letter A (for Armageddon) deep into her chest. Hester's grieving husband, disguised as a plastic surgeon named Roger Chillingsworth, later gains access to the child (who has been adopted by Dimmesdale and his coven after Hester's suicide) through promising to repair the young Antichrist's cloven hooves. In a Gotterdämmerung finish, Dimmesdale is forced to confess from his telepulpit, and his whole Crystal Cathedral is brought down around him by the psychic storm unleashed when Chillingsworth manages to apply a mixture of holy-water and Desitin to the Satanic child.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Mark Twain and Stephen King

Huck and Jim set out on their raft, little knowing that a transdimensional flaw has opened up beneath the mighty Mississippi, filling its waters with nightmarish creatures. Their voyage downriver is one long battle against the warty, tentacled horde. The combat makes Huck and Jim good friends, overcoming their racism and ageism, and their prolonged and agonizing deaths dur-

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ing the destruction of New Orleans will leave the reader in tears.

Remembrance of Things Past
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Marcel, an ageless vampire, inspired by his first nostalgia-provoking taste of blood after a long hibernation, narrates the whole complicated history of his relations with the Guermantes, Swanns and Verdurins, families on whom he has long preyed, both arterially and sexually. Joined by his undead fiancée, Albertine, Marcel wreaks havoc on Paris and the French countryside.

Great Expectations
Charles Dickens and Robert Bloch

Orphan Pip, enduring an abusive childhood, grows up to be a serial killer, his mentor the career criminal Magwitch. Tracked down by detective Bentley Drummle, Pip is eventually revealed to be a split personality and a transvestite, his other persona the reclusive Miss Havisham.

The Old Man and the Sea
Ernest Hemingway and Peter Benchley

An old fisherman, his gorgeous daughter and a bachelor millionaire, accompanied only by a crew of documentary makers, set out to capture a Great White Shark that is terrorizing their home port.

As I Lay Dying
William Faulkner and Kathe Koja

The unburied corpse of Momma Bundren, harboring a malign spirit, draws the rest of the family down in a spiral of chaos, torture and mental instability.

Mrs. Dalloway
Virginia Woolf and Tanith Lee

Clarissa Dalloway, an English society woman, exists on another plane as an archetypical figure known as the Mistress of Boredom. Or so she believes. Gradually this persona — hallucinated or objectively real — comes to dominate Clarissa's earthly life, infecting all of those around her with terminal ennui. Will all of England succumb? Woolf and Lee keep the reader guessing till the very last minute!

Ivanhoe
Sir Walter Scott and Robert McCammon

Wilfred, son of Cedric, falls in love with Rowena, his father's maid,

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little wotting that she is a werewolf! Only the Talmudic spells of Rebecca the Jewess stand between Wilfred and a savage lycanthropic honeymoon!

Babbitt
Sinclair Lewis and Dean Koontz

George Babbitt, a prosperous real-estate broker, foolishly breaks ground for a new housing plat on the site of Zenith's old Indian graveyard.

The Ambassadors
Henry James and Dan Simmons

Lambert Strether, sent to Paris to rescue Chad Newscome from the clutches of the Countess de Vionnet, discovers that the Countess is in reality an ancient succubus who has Chad in her erotic thrall. Reinforcements arrive in the form of Chad's sister, but she too proves to be a lamia! Upon Chad's exsanguination, Lambert arrives back at Woollett, Mass., a drained husk of his former self.

But wait, educators — there's more! Coming soon are *The Last of the Mohicans*, by James Fenimore Cooper and Clive Barker; *Madame Bovary*, by Gustave Flaubert and Poppy Z. Brite; and *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and Peter Straub. In addition, noted horror anthologist Ellen Datlow is now compiling the *Norton Book of Splatterclassic Hybrids*, available Fall 1996.

So, as Joseph Conrad might have said, "Dial 1-800-THE-HROR now!"

Sincerely yours,
Asmodeus Murdoch

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Since his last appearance in F&SF, *Andrew Weiner has been turning his story "Seeing," (*F&SF, *September, 1992) into a novel called* Getting Near the End. *He finally returns to short fiction with "The Purple Pill."*

"'The Purple Pill,'" Andrew writes, "is a kind of update on Rog Phillips' 'The Yellow Pill,' a semi-famous sf story of the 1950s. My story reverses ['The Yellow Pill's'] situation which is why it is not really 'SF', although it is about *SF.... I suppose in a certain sense it is autobiographical."*

The Purple Pill

By Andrew Weiner

One

CONWAY WAS SITTING AT his drafting table, stirring non-dairy creamer into his second cup of coffee of the day, when Jackman called.

"Barry," he said. "Where the hell are those storyboards?"

Conway put down his coffee. "Storyboards?"

"For the Fairfax pitch. They were supposed to be on my desk this morning."

Conway tried to collect his thoughts. "I gave that one to Hal to finish up..."

But even as he spoke, he remembered that Hal had called in sick yesterday. Which had left just him and Nora scrambling to keep up with the rush of other work. The Fairfax pitch had simply slipped through the cracks.

Only a year or two ago, Hal's absence would hardly have been missed. As a Group Art Director, Conway had managed a team of half a dozen artists.

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And there had been a fat budget to call upon freelancers to handle overloads. But that had been before the agency's billings had begun to spiral downward, before Conway's group had been downsized and downsized again.

These days, he was lucky to have any help at all. Judging from the flood of resumes that crossed his desk, and the desperate calls from former colleagues, he was lucky to have a job himself.

Another screw-up, and he might not have it much longer.

"I'm sorry, Lou," he said. "Hal's off sick. I guess it didn't get done."

"We need that account, Barry," Jackman said. "Badly."

"You'll have the boards tomorrow. First thing."

He put the phone down and picked up his coffee. It was cold, but he drank it anyway. He would need it, to get through the day that stretched ahead of him.

He had worked late the previous night, then slept poorly, listening to his daughter cough in the next room. She had been coughing for what seemed like weeks. Her pediatrician was waiting on the tests, but he was pretty sure that it was asthma.

The disease of the '90s, he had said. It seemed like half of Melinda's grade one class were packing inhalers along with their lunch. Now there would be one more.

He was sick himself, probably with the same bug that had downed Hal. His eyes were sore, his sinuses ached, and he had shooting pains in his back. But he could not afford to take any time off right now.

He needed this job. As much as he hated it, he needed to hang on to it, at least until the economy picked up and he had someplace else to go to. If the economy ever picked up...

Right now, they were living in a house that was worth less than their mortgage. His wife, Alice, had not had a pay increase in two years, and her company was about to make more staff cutbacks. The transmission on the station wagon was shot, he was nudging the limits on all his credit cards, and he had no idea how they would cover Melinda's school fees next year. They might have to put her in the public system. But that didn't really bear thinking about, not with pushers in the playground and metal detectors at every door.

Soon he would get up and cross the room and sort through the mess on Hal's desk for the Fairfax storyboards. But what he needed to do first was to

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rest his eyes, just for a moment.

He put his arms on the drafting table, then allowed his head to drift down on top of them. He closed his eyes.

Just for a moment.

Two

"Cogan," the voice said.

He was lying on some kind of couch, between narrow metallic walls. A pattern hovered above him, intricate and multicolored. It took him a moment to realize that it was a face. Then he picked out the eyes, the mouth, the nose. The entire face was decorated with twirling lines and geometric shapes. He blinked, but the lines and shapes remained.

"Wha...?" he said. His mouth felt clumsy, as if unaccustomed to speech. "What...?"

"Cogan," the voice said again, with a trace of impatience. "Dreamtime is over."

It was a woman's voice, a woman's face. As she leaned closer, he could read the fine bone structure beneath the tattoos. Or was it some kind of paint? He saw that her head was bald, and covered in the same patterns.

"What...?" he said. "Where...?"

The woman's voice softened. "You must have been in deep," she said. "Real deep. Try sitting up."

He sat up on the couch and looked around him. He had been lying in some kind of capsule in a pink-walled room. There were five other capsules in the room, each of them sealed with a clear plastic lid. He glanced down into the nearest one. It was filled with a white mist. Through the mist he could glimpse a tattooed face.

"What is this place?" he asked. "Some kind of hospital?" Although even as he spoke, he knew that it was not a hospital.

The woman shook her head slightly. "Real deep," she said, again. "Happened to me once. I was a foot soldier in the siege of Troy. Inside the horse and everything. Got so into it, I didn't know where I was when I woke up. But it comes back, real quick."

She reached out a hand to help him from the capsule. He climbed out and rocked unsteadily on his feet.

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"Who are you?" he asked. "What am I doing here?"

"Harper," she said. "Harper Jennings. Your watch-partner. You really don't remember?"

"Watch-partner? I don't even know what that means. I don't know where I am, or how I got here. I don't understand anything."

"You were here all along, Cogan. In a moment, you'll remember."

"My name isn't Cogan," he said. "It's Conway. Barry Conway."

"Where were you, anyway?" she asked. She walked around the capsule and touched a control. A screen lit up. "Late Twentieth Century Earth. I've never been there. Didn't appeal."

"Been there?"

"In the dream."

"What dream? What are you talking about?"

"You've been asleep, Cogan. For two years, or two hundred years, depending on how you want to look at it. And while you were asleep, you dreamed you were someone called Barry Conway. But now it's time to wake up."

"That's crazy," he said. "I didn't dream that I was Barry Conway. I am Barry Conway."

"Your name is Cogan Phillips," she said. "You're a life-support tech on the starship Cool Canary, carrying a load of colonists to Barnard's World. You've been in cold-sleep for the past two years, hooked up to a dream-machine, and so have I. But now it's our watch."

"Starship?" he echoed. "Cold-sleep? Dream-machine? Do you know how crazy all this sounds?"

She gave a little gasp of exasperation and turned away from him. "Mirror," she said, pointing to the wall opposite them. "Full-length."

The pink wall glowed white, then became a shiny mirror. He gazed for a moment, fascinated and appalled, at his own heavily tattooed face. And then he was falling toward it. He put out a hand to stop himself. And plunged right into the mirror, all the way through to the darkness on the other side.

THREE

"Barry."

He felt a hand on his arm. He opened his eyes. He saw Nora standing beside him.

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"Nora," he said. "What time is it?"

"Eleven-thirty," she said. "I was down in typography, and when I came back you were sleeping. I hated to wake you up, but I thought you'd want me to..."

"I would have, yeah. Thanks."

Nora was just a year out of art school. She still needed a lot of reassurance.

He stretched his arms. "Jesus," he said. "I had the strangest dream. Like science fiction. I was on this spaceship..." He shook his head. "Just crazy stuff."

"Maybe you've been watching too much *Star Trek*."

"Me? I never watch that sci-fi crap."

"Me neither," Nora said.

"I mean, what does it have to do with anything real?"

"Nothing," Nora said. "Nothing at all."

Although, he reminded himself, there had been a time when he had been quite infatuated with *Star Trek* and similar movies and TV shows, entranced with the bold new worlds they revealed to him. As a teenager, he had soaked up hundreds and hundreds of hours of the stuff.

Now it had come back to haunt him.

"Would you do me a favor? Go find me Hal's work-up on the Fairfax pitch, while I get another coffee."

"Is that the cereal commercial?"

"Feminine hygiene. At least, I think it was."

He closed his eyes briefly in thought, and saw a brightly decorated face staring back at him. His eyes jerked open and his head snapped back.

"You all right, Barry?" Nora asked.

"I'm fine," he said. "And this is another perfect day."

He got up and began the long trek to the coffee machine.

Four

"Cogan," the voice said. It was a man's voice, a rich baritone. "We need to talk, Cogan."

Shit, Conway thought. *Not again.*

He was lying on a couch in a dimly lit room. He could not see anyone else in the room with him.

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He had stayed at work until ten that night, finishing up the Fairfax storyboards. He had left the work on Jackman's desk, then taken the elevator down to the ground floor, where the security guard had called him a cab. The cab had arrived and he had stepped out through the door and...

And what? He could not recall.

I'm asleep, he thought. *Nodding off in the cab, or maybe back home with Alice.*

Deliberately, he pinched himself on the thigh. He felt a tingle of pain. But he was still lying on the couch in the dimly lit room.

"This is no dream, Cogan," the voice said. "Pinching yourself won't help at all."

"Where are you?" he asked, peering into the shadows in the corners of the room. "I can't see you."

The voice laughed, a touch theatrically.

"I'm everywhere in this ship, Cogan. And nowhere."

"Don't tell me," he said. "Let me guess. You're the ship's computer, right?"

"So it's coming back to you."

"What's coming back to me is every dumb movie I ever wasted my time watching."

"This is remarkable," the voice said. "A sustained delusion of remarkable self-consistency. In all the years we have been using the dream-machines, we have never recorded such an extraordinarily persistent re-adaption trauma. But to answer your question: I'm not exactly a computer. More like a community of parallel processors. Although for the moment, that's close enough."

"I don't believe this," he said. "I don't believe any of it."

"What do you believe?"

"That I'm dreaming this. Or else going nuts."

"Going nuts," the voice echoed. "Not how I would usually describe it. But again, close enough. You are indeed going nuts, Cogan. You are in the grip of a psychotic fugue. A full-fledged retreat from reality."

"My name is Conway," he said. "Stop calling me Cogan."

"There is no Conway. There never was a Conway, only the construct you created in interaction with the dream-machine. For two years you lived the life of this fictional person, relishing the artless joys of a simpler, less

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stressful historical period, an escape fantasy of bucolic late-Twentieth Century Earth. But it's time to come back, Cogan. To let go of your delusion and face reality."

With these words, the wall of the room seemed to vanish. He was looking out at the stars, a million bright stars scattered across a deep blackness.

"*This* is reality," the voice said. "This harsh and magnificent universe through which we must travel in our fragile craft, buffeted by the winds between the stars, pounded mercilessly with hard radiation...this is the reality from which you seek to flee."

He looked out on the stars, the bright and terrible stars. And felt himself falling into them, falling unstoppably into that awful darkness.

Five

"Barry."

He felt a hand on his shoulder, shaking him.

"What?" he said.

He sat up in bed. It was still dark. The alarm clock on the bedside table told him that it was three in the morning.

"You were screaming," Alice said. "Screaming your head off. I thought I should wake you."

"Screaming?"

"You must have been having some kind of nightmare."

"I was. Jesus, I really was."

"Is something worrying you?" she asked.

"Nothing. It was just a bad dream, that's all."

"Because you've been awfully preoccupied these past few days."

"I'm fine," he said. "Just fine."

He turned away from her and went back to sleep.

Six

"Cogan."

The face looming over him was covered in lines and shapes. In the soft light glowing from the wall he saw that she was naked, and that he was, too. They were lying on a thin mat spread out on the floor of a tiny cubicle.

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"Harper?"

"You remember now?"

"No," he said. "I mean, I remember you from the first time I had this crazy dream. But I don't remember anything from before that."

She reached out her hand to touch him. "Maybe this will help," she said.

"No," he said. But he felt himself responding to her.

"We have an hour before our watch," she said, straddling him. "Let's not waste it. It's been a long time."

SEVEN

"You did a nice job on the Fairfax pitch," Jackman said. "Too bad we didn't get it."

"We didn't?"

Jackman put down his fork and wiped his mouth with his napkin.

"It was always a long shot. They were basically happy with the job Belton Robbins were doing for them. Said they wanted a new approach, but really they wanted same-old same-old. Usual story. But it's too bad all the same, because we needed some new billings."

Conway put down his own fork. He had not really been eating anyway, just moving the brightly colored pieces of salad around on his plate. He waited for the other shoe to fall.

"I wanted you to hear it from me first," Jackman said. "Before the rumors start flying. We're looking at another consolidation."

"Consolidation?"

"Your group with Turner's. Makes a lot of sense. We get to condense studio space, cut overhead...I can show you the spreadsheet. It's hard to argue with the numbers."

"And who..." For a moment, Conway could not bring himself to ask the question, but then he did anyway. "Who will be group head?"

"That's still up in the air. But I'm pulling for you, Barry. Don't doubt it."

Conway doubted it. But even if he did have Jackman's backing, he still didn't care much for his chances. Turner Woodley was an industry veteran, a multiple award-winner, creator of dozens of striking campaigns.

But then again, the man was a drunk, sometimes an obnoxious one at that. He was consistently disrespectful to senior management. And if the

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agency was serious about cutting costs, what better place to start than Turner's hefty compensation package?

He sat back, appalled at his own thoughts. Turner Woodley was an old friend, unfailingly generous over the years with his time and his advice. They had gone fishing, played poker, gathered their families together at Thanksgiving. Turner had helped him get this job.

Turner had two kids still in college, and another who was in and out of private psychiatric hospitals. He had a big house in Westchester and a summer place on the Cape, both mortgaged to the hilt. He was fifty-four years old, and looked older. If Turner lost his job he would probably never work again.

"Christ," he said. "I hope it doesn't come to that."

"But it will," Jackman said.

"Maybe we could work together..."

"Too many cooks. Too few efficiencies. Of course, if you don't want the job..." He gave Conway a searching look.

"Oh, I want it," he said. He felt something rise in his throat. "I really want it, Lou."

He got up from the table. "Excuse me a minute," he said. "I'll be right back."

He headed for the washroom door.

EIGHT

"In here, Cogan."

He was walking down a metal corridor, his boots echoing dully on the floor. He was carrying a pack on his back. Harper was standing ahead of him, motioning to an open doorway.

He followed her into a large open space, filled with row upon row of capsules. Different colored paths snaked through the rows, allowing access to the capsules.

"Yellow 27," Harper said, pointing. "Right over there."

She raced up the path, and he followed behind her. He was panting by the time he caught up with her. She was already staring intently at the screen on the side of the capsule.

"Biosign alert," she told him. "Low blood pressure reading."

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He looked down into the capsule. "You mean, this person is sick?"

"She may be," Harper said. "Although fifty to one it's the diagnostics on the blink. Check it out."

"Check what out?"

"Oh come on," she said. "Come on."

He stared back at her blankly. Exasperated, she reached over and flipped open his backpack, producing a thin metal tool with a clear plastic bulb on top. She inserted the end of the tool into a small hole beside the screen. The bulb glowed orange.

"Faulty memory," she said. "Pass me a new unit, will you?"

Preoccupied, he failed to respond. He was looking around him at the rows of capsules.

"All these people, they're crew members?"

She shook her head. "Cargo," she said. "Cold-sleep all the way. They don't get a wake-up call until we reach Barnard's."

"And they're all dreaming?"

"Like there's no tomorrow." She shook her head slowly. "I thought it was coming back to you. You didn't have any problem remembering before..."

"I'm sorry, Harper," he said. "I'm not Cogan. I don't know where he's gone, or what I'm doing here..." *I'm apologizing to a figure in a dream.* "But that's how it is."

"What use are you to me like this?" she asked. "You're no use to me at all."

He saw her eyes fill up with tears.

"I'm sorry," he said, again. And then he turned and ran away from her, through the maze of sleepers.

Nine

"Hey, you crazy, man?"

He was standing in the middle of the road, inches away from the hood of a cab. The driver of the cab was leaning out of the window and screaming at him. Behind the cab, other cars honked their impatience.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't see you."

"You want to kill yourself, take the subway," the cabbie said. "Now get out of my way."

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He crossed to the other side of the street and stood staring up at an unfamiliar office building. What was he doing here?

He remembered then: Dr. Graves. He had come here to see Dr. Graves, the psychiatrist recommended by his family doctor.

He walked to the entrance of the building and stared in through the revolving glass doors. He saw a lobby, elevators, people milling around. He saw a million bright stars.

"You going in or what?"

He turned to see a gray-haired woman with a deeply lined face. Or were those tattoos?

He looked back through the door. The stars were gone. "In," he croaked. "I'm going in." He pushed on the door and entered the building.

TEN

Dr. Graves had a dark beard and dark, thinning hair. His expression was serious, almost mournful, as Conway told his story.

"Are you under some stress at work, Mr. Conway?"

"Some, I guess. Isn't everyone?"

"You work long hours?"

"Yes."

"And worry about your job security?"

"Yes."

"What about your relationships, Mr. Conway? How are you getting along with your wife?"

"Fine. At least, when we get to see each other, everything's fine."

"When did you last have sexual relations with your wife?"

"Sexual relations?" The question momentarily startled him. "I guess it must have been, oh, a week or two ago."

"A week or two?"

"Well, maybe more like a month. What with both of us working so hard, sometimes it's hard to find the energy..."

"A month."

"Or two. What are you suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything. Simply exploring. What did you think I was suggesting?"

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"That I have some kind of sexual problem."

"Doesn't everyone, Mr. Conway? But no, I don't believe that. Your relations with this ah..."

"Harper," Conway said, flushing a dull red.

"Harper, thank you. Your fantasized sexual relations with Harper are only one element of a much larger and more complex wish fulfillment."

"Wish fulfillment? You think I like what's happening to me? I hate it. I hate every moment of it."

"The mind wants what it wants, Mr. Conway. And that is nothing to be ashamed of. Tell me, are you a frequent reader of science fiction?"

"A reader? I'm not much of a reader of anything. But I used to watch a lot of it. TV, drive-in movies, like that."

"You enjoyed it?"

"Oh, sure. The future. Seeing the future, bright and shiny and clean, I couldn't get enough of that. Just the idea that there would be a future, that we would get out of this century alive, it didn't even matter what kind of future. But I liked the space stuff the best. It was so..."

"So?"

"Optimistic," he said. "The idea that we wouldn't blow ourselves to pieces, wouldn't choke on our own pollution. That we would not only survive, but endure. Go out there and conquer these fantastic new worlds, using our minds and our machines and our courage. It was the optimism that I liked most of all."

"And you still watch these shows?"

"Not for years. I outgrew them, was what happened. I started dating, I went to art school, I traveled. I got a job, got married, bought a house, had a kid. I didn't have time for that stuff, anymore. It didn't have anything to do with my life. It seemed silly."

"Silly?"

"The whole idea. That we could go into space. That we should even want to. If you think about it, it's obscene. Children starving and we're spending money on space shuttles."

"And yet at some level," Dr. Graves said, "you have not let go of your dreams."

"Maybe not." He shook his head. "I was hoping you were going to tell me that this was all chemical. Some bad chemicals swirling around in my head."

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"Oh, but there are," Dr. Graves said. "Not bad chemicals exactly, but rather chemical imbalances. When you come under stress, that triggers the release of certain neurotransmitters, which in turn facilitate the psychotic break, allowing this bizarre ideation to emerge from your unconscious mind."

"But which comes first? The crazy ideas? Or the bad chemicals?"

"We can debate etiology if you like, Mr. Conway. But it doesn't really help us much. The real question is how to manage the situation. A decade or two ago, we would have spent many hours together discussing your ideation. But today, quite frankly, I don't have the time or the interest, and you don't have sufficient medical coverage. Fortunately there is an alternative."

"An alternative?"

Dr. Graves opened the drawer of his desk. He produced a container of purple pills. "These are new on the market. A really excellent anti-psychotic. I happen to have a sample you can take with you right now, and I'll write you a prescription for more."

Conway took the container and stared at it dubiously. "These pills will stop the delusions?"

"Stop them cold. Take one every morning and evening. If you feel another episode coming on, take another. They'll bring you back to Earth in a hurry."

Eleven

Conway leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms. The layout was finished, and it looked great. He felt tired, but it was a *good* tired.

Since being appointed head of the newly combined art group, Conway's productivity had been on an upward swing. After struggling for so long with limited resources, it was a relief to have a full department again. And although the work load had increased, too, it was simply a matter of working smarter. Turner Woodley had been a notoriously poor manager, and his former assistants had responded enthusiastically to Conway's new leadership.

It was too bad about Turner, of course. He really should call him up and take him out for lunch. And when the economy picked up, he would be able to throw a few freelance assignments his way.

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Actually, from his point of view, the economy was already picking up. Jackman had come through for him, swinging him a raise to accompany his new responsibilities. Not a lot of money, but enough to fix the station wagon and cover Melanie's school fees. Also, Alice had survived yet another round of cutbacks at her job. So things were looking up.

But the best news of all was the end of the dreams. Since he started taking the purple pills, he had stayed firmly rooted in the here-and-now. No more sleep capsules or dream-machines or echoing starship walls or tattooed ladies...

He felt a sudden, unexpected pang, thinking about Harper. She had seemed so real. It had all seemed real, at least while it was happening, but Harper most of all. He almost missed her. Almost.

"Conway."

He looked around him, wondering who it was. He had thought that everyone else had gone home hours ago. He could see no one in the room.

"Conway," the voice again, naggingly familiar.

He rubbed his eyes, but still could see no one.

"Or should I say Cogan?"

He got up from his desk and pulled on his jacket, possessed by an urgent need to get out of the room.

The walls of the corridor glowed a soft metallic pink. The elevator door looked different, too, sleek and ultra-modern and smaller than he remembered.

When the elevator arrived, he got in. A heavily tattooed man nodded to him, and he nodded back. They rode downward in silence.

He had not taken his pill that morning. He had been about to, and then Melanie had distracted him with some question about her birthday party, and it had slipped his mind. Everything had been going so well that he had allowed himself to become careless.

This isn't real, he told himself, as he stepped out into the lobby. *None of this is real.*

Except that there was no lobby, only another corridor, this one a dull blue. There was no front door leading to the street, only a large metal hatch.

"What do you think you're doing, Cogan?"

This time he did not look for the source of the voice. He knew that the voice was in his head.

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"I'm going home," he said.

He stepped up toward the hatch.

"That door leads directly into space," the voice said. "Open it, and you'll be sucked out."

"The door leads to the street," Conway said. But he hesitated, all the same.

"You've been in fugue for weeks," the voice said. "Now you're coming out of it. You're remembering that you are Cogan Phillips, a crew member on an interstellar starship. But your unconscious mind still resists that knowledge. It would rather kill you than accept the truth."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "You've got it all wrong."

"I've scanned the dreams from your cold-sleep," the voice said. "They are of an astounding mundanity. They reveal to me a life lived with no breadth of vision, with no higher purpose than getting through the day-to-day grind. A life filled with small betrayals of yourself and the people around you, with meaningless victories and pitiful defeats. Here you are doing important work, helping humanity populate the stars, building a better future for everyone. And yet you prefer to wallow in this absurd mire of your own creation. Why, Cogan? Why?"

"Because it's my life," he said. "That's why."

He leaned forward to press the button that would release the hatch.

"Cogan?" It was another voice, this one female. "What are you doing, Cogan?"

He turned to see Harper, coming down the corridor toward him.

"You'll kill yourself," she said. "You'll kill me. Don't do it, Cogan."

He paused, frozen, his finger on the button.

Harper was reaching out her hand toward him. "Come back to our quarters," she said. "We still have some time before our next watch."

He stared at her finely etched features, her glorious tattoos. He took a step toward her. As he moved, his hand brushed against the pocket of his jacket, and he felt the outline of the pill container inside.

Take one if you feel another episode coming on. That was what Dr. Graves had told him. Why hadn't he done so?

"Cogan," Harper was saying. "I've missed you, Cogan."

She was still holding out her hand. He reached out to take it, then pulled his hand back. He fumbled in his pocket for the pill container. His hands were

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shaking so badly that when he opened it, he spilled the contents on the floor. He got down on his hands and knees and picked up a pill.

"What are you doing?" Harper asked.

"He's acting out of his delusion," the voice of the computer explained. "I believe he thinks he's taking some kind of medication."

Conway popped a pill in his dry mouth and tried to swallow it. He gagged momentarily. Then the pill went down.

He stood up and faced Harper.

"I've taken an anti-psychotic drug," he said. "In a minute or two, all this will fade away. You, too, Harper. I'm sorry."

He wondered why he was apologizing.

"Cogan," she said. But her voice was fainter now, it came to him as if from a great distance. And her tattoos were fading, too. He realized that he was staring at a Filipino woman, one of the building's night maintenance staff. She was staring back at him in some concern.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Fine," he croaked. "Now."

He turned back to the hatch. It was fading out rapidly now, so that he could discern beneath it the outlines of the front door.

"Don't," said the voice of the computer. It was slurred and indistinct. "Open. That. Door."

"Did you hear that?" he asked the cleaning woman?

"Hear what?" she asked.

The voice was gone. It was all gone: the echoing corridors, the exit hatch, Harper...There was only the door that led back to his real life.

He pushed firmly on the door and stepped out on to the avenue.

TWELVE

The sun had gone down hours ago, but it was still oppressively hot, another greenhouse effect summer. The air was stale and smelled of exhaust fumes, with a lingering undertaste of garbage, the remnants of a spring municipal workers' strike.

The sky was full of light. Neons flashed up the avenue. No stars were visible.

Sirens wailed in every direction.

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A man lay sleeping on the sidewalk in front of the building. Another man approached him, hand outstretched, a wild expression in his eyes. He gave the man his spare change, then crossed to the curb to hail a cab.

As the cab pulled up, he glanced back toward the building. For a moment, he could see the great starship hanging against a backdrop of stars. He took a half-step toward it. And then it was gone.

"Shit," he said.

He got in the cab.

Author's Note: As long-term SF readers may have realized, this story was inspired by Rog Phillip's story "The Yellow Pill" (Astounding Science Fiction, *October 1958) which I first read in one of Judith Merril's wonderful* Best SF *collections.*

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SCIENCE

JANET ASIMOV

LANGUAGE: THE MOST POWERFUL DRUG

"WORDS ARE, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind." Kipling said so, and he ought to know. I was once forced to memorize his poem "If" and it's still occupying some of my brain circuitry, of which I have little to spare these days.

Even Confucius said, "Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men." Did we always have the power of words? How does language work in the brain? Current scientific research has not completely answered these questions but it has made progress in understanding some mysteries.

My favorite definition of language is way down on the list in my big dictionary: "Any system of formalized symbols, signs, sounds, gestures, or the like used or conceived as a means of communicating thought, emotion, etc." I hope you noticed that in this definition, formalized signs are language.

To begin with, language is more — and also less — than speech, vocal or signed. Speech has many uses other than the communication of thought by means of language, according to John L. Locke, head of the department of speech science at the University of Sheffield.

Locke says that speech can be "neither communicative nor particularly social," and speculates that language evolved "in response to speech, as a system of policing its otherwise unruly output of sounds and babbling." Which reminds me of the way language fails to police the unruly output of sounds coming out of various humans. I can't imagine why the word "Congress" has sprung into my mind....

Oh, well. Let's console ourselves by accepting the fact that while some vocal or gestural speech may com-

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municate emotion or intent, it is not language. This type of speech is also used by many other animals, to proclaim territoriality, court the opposite sex, call offspring, etc.

It's true that many parrots can accurately imitate human vocal speech, but with the possible exception of Alex the Gray, this is not considered to be even close to the human use of language. I'll get to primate gesturing soon.

Nevertheless we humans certainly are a talky bunch (Locke says "unlike other primates, human beings talk even when we have nothing of importance to say"). We often communicate without words or with language not meant to communicate linguistic meaning, as when we talk to babies, lovers, pets, ourselves, or in social chitchat.

We start early to exercise our talent for speech. Studies of infant babbling show that it starts as young as seven months, and occurs even in the hand signaling of deaf infants, who readily come to distinguish hand "babbling" from ordinary gestures. Babbling is considered to be a form of play, of imitating adults, and of maintaining connectedness to real or imaginary others.

Babies also relate early to speech and language nuances. Elliott Blass of Johns Hopkins University has shown that newborn humans of all ethnic groups are calmed by "shhh" sounds but pay close attention to clicking sounds.

Peter W. Jusczyk, of the State University of New York at Buffalo, says that babies as young as four and a half months listen four seconds longer to their own names than to the names of others, and are attuned to words like "mamma" and "dadda" that evoke emotions in the speaker as well as the baby.

Which brings me to "parentese" —the way parents talk to babies. Stanford psychologist Anne Fernald found that babies too young to talk act as if they understand simple language. If normal, babies immediately notice changes in voice quality.

All over the world, warning calls are short, sharp, and repeated, while comforting noises are low frequency and crooning. Praise starts with an emphatic first syllable followed by a downward pitch — a dog will wag its tail and a baby will smile if someone says GOOD boy.

Infants can detect differences in pronounciation of the basic units of language (phonemes), but by the time babies are six months old they have begun to ignore the minor variations in the way phonemes are used in their home language.

Long before they use words, babies understand the emotional quali-

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ties and phonemes of their native language. Recent studies show that babies take less than 400 milliseconds to distinguish the phonemes of their own language from others.

Babies apparently practice language phrases before they can speak words, according to Michael P. Lynch and his colleagues at Purdue University. After six months of age they babble in distinct phrases averaging three seconds long, with a rhythm similar to the phrases of adult speech.

Psychologist Laura Ann Petitto, of Montreal's McGill University, theorized that babies have an inborn "structure-seeking mechanism" that searches for repeated patterns in the language of adults.

Lorraine McCune, at Rutgers University, discovered that when babies are learning to speak, they begin to grunt — a sound that occurs when air deep in the lungs is forced through a constriction of the larynx. McCune thinks purposeful grunts are a transition phase in the development of language.

A baby's babbling and grunting will turn into definite language only if someone responds. Up to the age of five, a baby's brain is still growing and flexible enough to use the grammar he hears in the speech of those around him. Isolated children can later be taught words but they never truly master language.

Can the other primates master language? Chimps and gorillas do not, of course, possess good anatomy for vocal speech and their brains are much smaller than ours. They can be taught sign language although they use it rather sloppily because their hands can't form the signs well. They can also be taught to use rudimentary symbols on a computer. The fact that they can use any of our languages at all makes it clear that Homo sapiens is not unique but has some close living relatives.

Outstanding research has been done with these higher primates. According to Dr. Francine G. P. Patterson in Woodside, California, the gorillas Koko and Michael carry on conversations in sign language and make up creatively descriptive phrases. They tend to invent language in the style of small children, who use familiar words to invent a phrase that will describe something for which they do not know the name. The gorilla description of a zebra was "white tiger."

Dr. Patterson says that in English, "New words tend to conform in some way to an existing system possessed by the language itself and/or the inventor." Koko now seems to be varying words in order to describe different types of leafy food, as im-

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portant to her as the many words for snow are to Eskimos.

The primate genetically closest to us is the chimpanzee, who can also be taught sign language. The bonobo, or pygmy chimpanzee, is the most skilled, and one named Kanzi is amazing. Not only is he a remarkable toolmaker, but he learned to recognize over a hundred English words simply by listening to humans talk. Kanzi can create sentences using a special computer (he has not been taught ASL).

Work by Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and Mark Greenfield at the Language Research Center Center in Georgia shows that Kanzi changes the meaning of a group of words by changing the word order, just as we do.

Since these relatives can use language a little, we assume that our hominid ancestors did even better. But was the language of hominids spoken? Probably not, according to David Armstrong and colleagues at Washington, D.C.'s Gallaudet University — the first college for the deaf.

Although our hominid ancestor Homo erectus had a moderately large brain, his small pharynx was like that of a chimpanzee, not suited for the complex sounds of human language. His hands, however, were almost identical to those of modern humans. Armstrong thinks that with good hands and large brain, Homo erectus used language — *sign* language.

It was once thought that the signing speech of the deaf was a simple gestural communication, not a real language. The deaf were frequently treated as retarded people. Then in 1712 a French priest trying to educate the deaf learned their sign language and founded a school that became the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes.

In 1815, an American surgeon had a deaf daughter, Alice Cogswell. He persuaded the Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to go to Europe to find a teacher for the deaf. Gallaudet found Laurent Clerc at the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes, brought him back to Hartford, Connecticut, and in 1817 they established the American School for the Deaf.

Clerc taught French Sign Language which was soon mixed with various indigenous American signs, especially those invented by a group of genetically deaf people on the island of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. The sign language mixture became ASL, American Sign Language.

Vocal speech depends on sound modulation by a hidden vocal apparatus in the throat. In contrast, ASL is a three-dimensional visual language

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that depends on the way the hands are moved through space, the shape and size of the gestures, the location of these gestures in the spatial field, and the accompanying visible facial expressions.

In spite of the differences, ASL is as remarkably complex as any spoken language — changing, developing, adding new forms and condensing others.

Like a spoken language, mastery in ASL is best achieved when it is learned early. This is important to remember, since 90 percent of the parents of deaf children have normal hearing. These parents should learn ASL.

ASL is not the same thing as "signed English," in which signs for English words are used in a clumsy approximation of English sentences. ASL is much faster, with its own grammar and system for arranging words. Signed English is useful at times, and so is lip-reading and learning to speak (more likely when a child is not *totally* deaf), but according to its users, ASL provides liberation into true language creativity.

Scientists were surprised to find that in spite of the visual spatial imagery necessary for ASL, it is not processed along with other spatial visualization in the right cortical hemisphere of the brain, but comes from the left hemisphere just like spoken language.

Ursula Bellugi, at the Salk Institute, studied deaf people who have had strokes in the cerebral cortex. Those with damage in the left hemisphere were able to move objects accurately in space but could not create words and sentences in sign language. Those with damage to the right hemisphere had trouble perceiving non-linguistic spatial patterns ("topographic" space) but had normal ability to make sign language ("linguistic" space).

Bellugi has said that deaf people think and dream in signs, and that learning sign language increases the "ability to grasp patterns in space."

Is it easier for a child to learn ASL or spoken English? Studies have been done with hearing children who have one deaf parent and one hearing parent. Both parents use ASL, and one of them speaks aloud to the child. In ongoing research, Dr. Petitto has found that these babies learn to speak and to sign at the same rate and in the same stages!

One of the stages in learning language is the use of "private speech," studied by Laura E. Berk at Illinois State University. She agrees with the findings of Russian psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky who died — unknown by the west — in 1934.

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Vygotsky believed that private speech in childhood is essential for adequate development of cognition, and is strongly dependent on (as Berk puts it) "socially interactive environments."

Berk finds that private speech starts out with the child speaking words aloud to himself at about age four, progresses to almost inaudible muttering by age five, and then to "inner speech." Children with attention deficits and/or cognitive problems usually take longer to go through the stages of private speech.

Language, either spoken or sign, is a product of the activity of the brain—but how is it organized there? It was once thought that language was an "encapsulated" activity, separate from other functions performed by the brain, but this notion was disproved by the work of Michael K. Tanenhaus of the University of Rochester, and his colleagues.

By monitoring eye movements during tests, these researchers showed that nonlinguistic visual information influences the way language is processed in the brain. When a tester gives an order that is linguistically ambiguous, subjects must resolve the ambiguity in order to decide how to carry out the instructions.

A subject told to move candy looks at the candy *before* the tester even completes the word "candy." When both candy and a candle are on the table, the looking takes longer because the each word has an identical first syllable.

You'd think that people would wait to hear the entire word before swiveling their eyes to an object, but primates have always been quick to look — a vital talent when a mysterious noise in the tree can be a baby slithering down or a snake slithering up.

When Tanenhaus's subjects were ordered to "put the apple on the towel in the box," their eye movements would at first shift uncertainly between the towel and the box. If told to "put the apple *that's* on the towel in the box," they would instantly look at the apple's correct destination — the box.

As Tanenhaus says, "linguistic and visual inputs are processed together, in a mutually dependent way." People make goal-oriented, largely unconscious decisions (shown in eye movements) before they have consciously deciphered the full meaning of the order given to them. They use visual information to change the deciphering process.

When I was writing about this in a very short piece on language, I wondered if the use of visual information in linguistic decisions was easier

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when visual symbols form the primary language.

I still don't know, but I'm bemused by what happened when an orange was placed in front of the chimpanzee Kanzi. He hesitated if told "go to the colony room and get the orange." When told "get the orange *that's* in the colony room," Kanzi did not hesitate but immediately went to fetch this other orange.

It seems to me that all of us primates have a lot in common, but what about other bright animals — like dolphins?

Researchers have been trying for years to find out the extent of intelligence in dolphins (and their cousins the bigger whales). Most people agree that dolphins experience their watery world primarily from information obtained through sound rather than vision.

Echolocation builds an acoustic image of the environment. According to Ralph Strauch in a 1983 book, a dolphin uses its sonar to experience the world by receiving a pair of acoustical waveforms in its two acoustical receptors. The dolphin could then transmit this experience directly to the brain of another dolphin by making sounds that reproduce the waveforms of its echolocated sense impression.

Mind to mind transmission indeed! Does it happen? I don't know, but dolphins and other whales certainly make many different sounds in complex patterns. If they have any sort of language, it would be unlike our linear variety. We hear and see our environment, but must use words, spoken or signed, to communicate what we've heard, seen, smelled, and felt.

Some people claim that they've experienced direct mind to mind transmission from other humans or dogs or horses or computers or secretive aliens, but I'm still waiting for hard, verified evidence.

In the meantime, there are plenty of other mysteries about ordinary human language. For example, all cultures past and present use languages that are accompanied by facial expressions and gestures, but are spoken aloud in words.

Of course, the correct anatomy for complicated vocalization exists in Homo sapiens sapiens. Even Homo sapiens neanderthalensis had a hyoid bone in his throat and probably used a spoken language.

These two varieties of Homo sap may have talked as much as we do, but why did signing hominids switch from sign to speech when they became Homo sapiens? Especially since sign language is every bit as rich and "socially binding" as the spoken variety.

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It's probable that spoken language took over as human life became more "enriched" (a fancy term for more complicated).

In the first place, we stood erect — but so did hominids before us. Lucy, the small-brained 3.6 million-year-old hominid called Australopithecus afarensis, was thought to be the first to walk erect, but there's now a contender —3.9 to 4.2 millionyear-old Australopithecus anamensis.

These early hominids are considered to be human although they did not have what we would call a spoken language. Their erect posture continued in their descendents, eventually changing everything.

An erect posture makes carrying things easier. Chimps will sometimes walk erect when carrying objects like food or a stone to smash nuts. Hominids walking erect could easily carry weapons and tools as they hunted small prey or searched for carcasses to scavenge. Perhaps by the time Homo erectus evolved he had invented a way of stashing his more elaborate weapons and tools in a primitive leather belt or sack, but he'd still have to carry in his hand the fire he'd begun to tame 500,000 years ago.

It must have been hard to communicate with signs while carrying things, so perhaps survival was easier for those with better vocal apparatus, complete by the time of Homo sapiens.

Another factor was that the thick body hair of primates began to vanish. Erect posture and lack of body hair both keep the body cooler in hot climates, although head hair remains to take the full brunt of the sun's rays.

Hairlessness meant that a baby had much more trouble clinging to the body of his mother, who then had to carry him as well as tools and food, and it also meant a bigger social change.

Social primates with body hair engage in elaborate grooming rituals that serve to reassure individuals and keep the group emotionally bonded together. Anthropologist Robin I. M. Dunbar of University College London has observed that when a group of primates is large, manual grooming is used more and longer, to help "maintain social cohesion."

Dunbar believes that when we were forming larger and larger groups, we had also lost our body hair. Manual grooming of hairless bodies did not suffice as a communal rite so making noises took over, and became "socially cohesive" talking. This "group gossiping" informs the participants about everyone in the tribe, including people not actually present.

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Communal talking would help the group feel bonded against potentially dangerous groups of human strangers who could not reciprocate in the group gossiping. It's an interesting theory that helps me reconcile to humanity's irritating habit of endless gossip and small talk.

All languages evolve, so what about the future?

There is now, and always has been—as Shakespeare said—a "great feast of languages." Fine. I'm not advocating getting rid of anyone's native language and the riches of culture it represents.

I just hope that in the future there'll be an acceptable, enjoyable global language that each of us could use to communicate with anyone anywhere on a planet that now has a global civilization due to modern technologies for transportation and communication.

Perhaps this global language will include parts of newly developed languages, like computerese, or the one that seems to have sprung full-grown from the brow of...Klingons.

Thanks to Marc Okrand's Klingon tapes and *Klingon Dictionary*, many people are already fluent in Klingon. Perhaps some Klingon should be added to the global language, which of course will be called TERRAN.

In adding Klingon, we must keep in mind that words are the most powerful drug used by sentient beings. After all, Klingon words sound so strong, so replete with gutteral growls and salivary ejaculations...

I can hardly wait for the day when people who don't want to understand science and don't appreciate science fiction get yelled at by users of Klingon.

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Robert J. Levy's first story for F&SF appeared in our July, 1995 issue. In addition to being a published poet, Robert is also Executive Editor at United Feature Syndicate.

Regarding "Every Day Different," he writes, "I work full time at an office. As with many such jobs, there is a certain amount of repetition. Sometimes, for control freaks such as myself, this can be reassuring; at other times, you stare at the computer screen wondering why something new and surprising doesn't happen. In this story, I tried to take the latter desire and push it to its logical, or illogical, extreme."

Every Day Different

By Robert J. Levy

THERE WAS AN UNVARYING sameness to Lester Manning's days at the public relations firm of Selvage & Fleischman that he found insidiously comforting and yet vaguely pernicious. His job as the head copy editor, he once reasoned in a rare flight of poetic excess, was like an old bowling shoe: It might fit perfectly, but one could never quite escape the disconcerting knowledge that hundreds of others had worn it before.

During his two decades at the firm, however, Lester had kept whatever fleeting reservations he had about his stultifying vocation to himself. In the course of that time — by doing solid if uninspired work, rarely overlooking a serial comma, never neglecting a misspelled word, truckling to those above him and gently patronizing those beneath him, wearing faultless suits and unimpeachable ties, in short, by fitting in perfectly and never ruffling feathers — he had risen to a position of solid respectability within the organization. That he was a somewhat aloof man, accepted but not exactly liked by his colleagues, only gave weight to the air of sobriety he brought to his work.

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So when the company's director, Mr. Templeton, declared all Fridays hence forward to be Casual Day, Lester, unlike his colleagues, remained ambivalent about the lax bonhomie such an edict would undoubtedly encourage. It meant change, and change was inimical to Lester's nature. Things had to be orderly. Things had to be neat. "*I*'s" had to be dotted and "*t*'s" crossed.

However, there was another side to Lester. Typically, after work, sitting alone in his modest midtown apartment, he would begin drinking scotch while the sunlight waned. As the city grew dark, he would slowly fill with self-loathing, his mood growing black as the night itself. Soon he would find himself embarking on another round of endless introspection regarding the hollowness, pathos and unending sameness of his life. He would stare at his own vague reflection in the TV set, there behind the news broadcasts and music videos, and imagine his ghostly face as an appropriate symbol of the life he led in the world — or rather, the life he didn't lead. He knew himself to be a man incapable of living, a man so afraid of change and spontaneity that even the prospect of going to work in different attire completely unnerved him. At last, he would fall into a fitful, unrewarding sleep.

When the Friday morning of Casual Day arrived, Lester approached it with all the trepidation of a man confronting the gallows. On the other hand, his ablutions, coiffure, choice of tie and the press of his pants were no less correct than on any other day. Casual didn't mean sloppy, he reasoned.

From the moment he arrived at the office, he knew something was amiss. Everyone he passed stared at him for a fleeting second, then turned away. The men wore jeans, open-collared shirts and sneakers; some of the women wore culotte-style outfits and pants with tennis shoes.

Lester went to the men's room and looked at himself in the mirror. He was attired in full business regalia — gray pin-striped suit, military stripe tie, black Oxfords. All was as usual — except that he had no memory of dressing this way. He had intended to dress casually, in accord with Mr. Templeton's edict, but something in his unconscious had obviously balked at the prospect. He had — trancelike, in robotic fashion — dressed as for every other day at work. Staring at himself, he saw a tear well up and brim his eyelid. He wiped it away, but it was as though he watched a movie of someone else, some other hand, wiping the tear from someone's else eye.

He went back to his office, unable to meet the gaze of his colleagues, burying himself in a travel manuscript about distant places and far-off vistas

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that he would never see, never know, except in the rather abstract form of repunctuating someone else's experiences.

At the end of that weekend, on Sunday evening, faced with the prospect of yet another day at Selvage & Fleischman, Lester drank more than usual. In fact, he drank himself into a stupor. He sank deeper than ever before into a morass of self-vilification, a dark, bottomless pit of his own loathing. Bits and pieces of the latter half of the evening surfaced momentarily into his consciousness, like grotesque, distended fish from the depths of some alien sea, only to be again swamped by the black, roiling muck of his despair. He thought of suicide, but that notion, too, dissolved in his alcohol haze. He raged about his living room upending chairs and smashing pottery.

What were all these "things" doing here? he asked himself at one point. *What was all this stuff? It didn't make a life. It wasn't living. I am already dead.*

Then, as he sank down to the very bottom of his well of misery, which, in seconds, would give way to unconsciousness, he cried out, over and again, to no one in particular, to no god, to no person — to nothing, in fact, that he could see, save the pristine walls of the pristine cage of a life he had constructed for himself:

Why does it have to be this way? Why is every day the same? Why can't my days be different?

And, improbably, as he blacked out on the living room floor, he felt a presence, a hand. Something, or someone, had heard his plea, pulled him back from the edge of complete oblivion, and granted him his wish.

Monday morning, as Lester rode the elevator to the 50th-floor offices of Selvage & Fleischman, the sudden altitude change kicked his already throbbing hangover headache onto a new level of pain. He had only a foggy recall of the previous night, and virtually no memory of how his living room had ended up a shambles. In too much distress to feel regret, he bulled ahead on instinct alone. Eyes narrowed against the inevitable glaring office lights, he lurched from the elevator as the door opened, bumping into Fanshawe from the copy department.

"Morning, Mr. Manning," said Fanshawe in the cheeriest voice imaginable. "Hey, you already look like a casualty! Congrats!" As the man continued down the hall, Lester noticed that his arm was in a sling.

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Lester, nonplussed, walked toward his corner office at the furthest end of the corridor. Those he passed looked like the ranks of a defeated army. Some had bandages on their heads. Some used crutches. Others sported eye patches and tourniquets. It looked as though some terrible disaster had hit the office in his absence. Lester's secretary smiled up at him, nodding a cheery good morning despite the obviously confining neck brace she wore.

"Good day, Mr. Manning. All your mail is on your desk, and Mr. Templeton wants to see you at 10."

"Right," said Lester, opening his office door. "Miss Alvarez, are you quite all right?"

"Of course, Mr. Manning, whatever should be wrong?"

"Nothing, just asking."

Manning closed the office door behind him and sat at his desk, feeling utterly discombobulated. Something terrible had happened to all his co-workers over the weekend, but everyone acted as if it were business as usual. Lester felt edgy, a bit insane. So he did what he normally did when feeling things were getting out of control: He began leafing through the memos on his desk. There was the usual nonsense about hirings and departures (no one was ever fired, of course, but merely left for new ventures), shutdowns of the air conditioning over the weekend, new cafeteria hours...

One memo, though, stopped him cold. It looked, in almost every way, exactly like the memo he had recently received regarding Casual Day. In fact, it could have almost passed for the same document. However, this memo, also from Mr. Templeton, announced that today was officially Casualty Day, and that all employees were required to come as injury victims. The memo was unclear about whether one actually had to injure oneself or merely dress in costume. What Lester had seen so far suggested, frighteningly, that the former was the case.

Lester checked his calendar to make sure it wasn't April Fool's Day. It wasn't. This was the first he had heard of a such a preposterous event. He determined to think nothing more of it and get to work. At 10 sharp he sat before the CEO, Mr. Templeton, whose leg, in an uncomfortable-looking cast, was propped up on the desk before him.

"Hmm..." said Templeton, eyeing Lester suspiciously, "Except for your slightly bleary eyes and pained expression, you don't particularly look like a casualty."

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"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't see the memo until this morning."

"Well, all right then. But don't let it happen again. I like a man to fit in, you know. Don't like wild individualism. You're not a wild individual, are you Lester?"

"Of course not, sir."

"Fine then. Be on about your business."

Lester virtually hid in his office the rest of the day. He checked to see that no further memos announcing unusual days had crossed his desk, and sped home as fast as he could, into the protection of the sane world.

Had Templeton gone mad? Casualty Day? What sort of way to improve office morale was that?

That night Lester ate dinner, alone as usual, at a local eatery. He went home to watch the news — everything outside of his office seemed to be proceeding apace in normal fashion. He slept poorly, though, his dreams clouded by phantasmal memories of his previous debauched night and the vague recollection of his plea to dark gods that could not possibly exist.

The next day Lester knew something was wrong the moment the elevator doors slid open. Wilkinson, from production, buttonholed him en route to his office.

"The platypus," said Wilkinson.

"Excuse me?"

"The platypus. A rare creature growing rarer all the time. They have to be saved from extinction."

"Of course," said Lester, noticing for the first time the "Protect Our Monotremes" button on his lapel. Lester signed some sort of petition and scurried on toward the oasis of his office, a safe haven at a seemingly infinite distance down the hall — infinite because he now realized that everyone at work was carrying a clipboard with a petition, and all wore buttons on their lapels advertising various charities and organizations.

He arrived at his workspace, managed to sign his secretary's petition on "Working Moms for the Metric System," and bolted into his office, securing the door behind him. He frantically shuffled through papers on his desk until he found the memo — the memo he had never seen, that could not possibly have been there the day before, but was, none the less, dated the day before. It was in his hands now, tangibly real, announcing to all members of the

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company that today would be Cause Day. Everyone was required to come to work as a representative of some cause and politic in favor of that position.

Lester sat at his desk, sweat trickling down his neck. He knew he was either going mad or that something horrible had transpired at Selvage & Fleischman.

Casualty Day? Cause Day? What was happening?

Things were not cleared up much for Lester at his 9:45 session with Templeton, who spent the whole time talking up his "Bosses Against Bonuses" petition, which Lester, under duress, finally signed.

"You do have a cause?" Templeton said, at one point, eyeing Lester warily.

"Uh, well, you see sir, I didn't get the memo ..."

"What, again! Look Lester, you already used that excuse. You're on the message routing list like everyone else. If I didn't know better, I'd say you just weren't a team player."

Lester spent the remainder of that work day signing one petition after another in favor of everything from "Save The Whelks" to "Biker Chefs for a Leaner, Speedier America." Everyone at work seemed dead serious about their cause, no matter how absurd, and all seemed to accept unquestioningly the sensibility of Cause Day.

Finally Lester escaped to the safety of his midtown apartment, and breathed the chill air-conditioned atmosphere of rationality while swigging from a cold tumbler of vodka. The radio broadcast the usual news; the customary programs were on TV. Everything was quite normal everywhere else. It was just that something had happened to his workplace he could not explain. It wasn't as though everyone at Selvage & Fleischman had gone mad, because, despite the odd behavior of his colleagues, they all seemed quite rational. It was just that each day had been completely different ...

And then it struck him: His prayer on that dimly remembered drunken night.

He finally recalled his invocation to the void as he swam down into unconsciousness that fateful evening. He remembered his supplication to dark gods in which he did not really believe, beseeching them to make his days different. And now, finally, he recalled, too, that incredibly vague sense — before complete unconsciousness hit him, before he submerged utterly — of something responding to his *cri de coeur*, as though some infinitesimally

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distant hand had reached out and grabbed him at the last second before oblivion had overwhelmed him.

Was it possible that, somehow, his plea had been answered in this utterly perverse fashion? And was it perverse? Wasn't it simply literal? He went to sleep with a knot in his stomach, dreading the morning and what the prospect of a new workday might bring.

It wasn't noticeable at first. Everyone at his office looked the same; there were no outward signs of abnormality. However, as he passed Haring from accounting, the man stopped him, and, pointing to Lester's balding pate, asked "Is that your head, or is your neck blowing bubble gum?" Haring burst into guffaws and continued down the hall.

When Lester arrived at his office, Ms. Alvarez greeted him with a smile: "Morning Mr. Manning. You know, you have a classic Roman nose...it's *roamin'* all over your face." She burst out laughing as Lester entered his office.

Let me guess, said Lester to himself as he shuffled through the memos on his desk. And there it was once again: the memo from yesterday, which never existed yesterday, which somehow came into existence retroactively today, declaring that this was Caustic Day. All employees were asked to be especially withering and sarcastic in their dealings with their colleagues for the duration.

He suffered through several unkind japes from Mr. Templeton during their ten o'clock meeting — in which his boss again accused him, even more threateningly than the day before, of not sharing the company spirit. Lester went home early to lay in bed, nearly comatose, staring at the ceiling.

It wasn't him; something had happened to the reality he inhabited, all of it instigated in some supernatural manner by his wish. He understood now that every day would indeed be different, but just how different he would never know. So far, all the days seemed to rely on close spellings, puns almost, of *Casual Day*, but when those possibilities ran out, in what direction would this mad roller coaster ride take him?

Over the next few weeks he began to find out just how freakish reality could become. The very next day turned out to be Claus Day, in which everyone dressed like St. Nick (for no particular purpose Lester could discern, since it was September). Soon followed Causality Day, in which cause and effect appeared to be jumbled: xerox machines subtracted rather than repro-

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duced copies, and memos unwrote themselves before his eyes. Casuistry Day was, perversely, something of a relief; Lester merely had to endure endless sophistical arguments, by everyone from the mailroom staff to his boss, about the existence of god and the meaning of life. Claws Day proved unpleasantly pointy.

Lester, by this time, was a complete wreck; and yet, being Lester, he could not bring himself to resign or call in sick, even though his demeanor at work and apparent refusal to comply with the terms of the company's "special" days was earning him no brownie points with Mr. Templeton. In fact, though he would still have been the perfect employee in his own reality, in this altered every-day-different universe he was increasingly seen as an upstart, a troublemaker. The fact was, as Mr. Templeton had hinted on several occasions, Lester was now in danger of losing his job.

Lester, meanwhile, had narrowed it all down to two equally disturbing possibilities. The first was that he had gone completely mad and was permanently immersed in some sort of intense schizophrenic state that looked and felt exactly like real life save for the bizarre unpredictableness of each new work day. The second possibility was that he had indeed come in contact, however briefly, with some entity that had either changed the very nature of this reality or had propelled him into a concatenating series of alternate realities, in which each day was forever unpredictable.

Ultimately, though, the reasons for his predicament seemed almost irrelevant, since he was trapped, in either case, in this alternate universe until further notice. The trouble was, there was no way to cope: Each day he arrived at work without the benefit of the previous day's memo to prepare him, and each day he was roundly chastised by Mr. Templeton.

Lester was not a man who believed in deities or judgments from on high, yet, unquestionably, this had the feeling of a reckoning from a power above him. That it felt like a judgment, Lester understood, did not mean that whatever power had put him here was doing it for that reason. Maybe it was some advanced intelligence's form of play or experimentation or sheer vindictiveness. In any case, the power responsible for his predicament was clearly not intending to make itself known, so he had to rely on his own instincts. Just on the off chance that he wasn't insane, Lester determined to keep a positive attitude about the ever-shifting world he found himself in.

However, as time wore on, he grew morose. He began to understand that if every day was different, there would never be any progression or forward

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momentum to his life, that each new morning was simply a single piece of a puzzle that fit into no greater picture. Life had become completely incoherent, driving him deeper into, not away from, his despair, the very despair that had originally compelled him to make his now-regretted wish.

The days grew increasingly strange — and, at times, threatening. Claustrophobia Day preceded Class Struggle Day which preceded Classics Day. One morning the elevator doors swung open to reveal a pitched battle underway between sales and accounting (Von Clausewitz Day). Bonfires blazed near several distant desks; live ammo filled the air. Lester belly-crawled to his office and locked himself in till the next morning.

When he emerged, expecting the worst, he found instead, for the first time in weeks, that everything was absolutely normal. People went about their usual work in the usual way without any oddities or peculiarities. It was only later in the afternoon, when he found the previous day's memo declaring Unexceptional Day, that he realized this "normality" was merely a blip on a greater map of insanity, and thus, in fact, was not normal at all, but ultimately a more frightening version of "difference" than he had ever imagined possible. He also realized that, for the first time, the special day had veered decisively away from a near-spelling of *Casual Day*, and this new development only filled him with greater foreboding about what lay ahead.

That night he went home to his apartment and stared out the window at the normal world, which went on its merry way, unaffected by the little schism in reality that was Lester's life. He drank to forget, but ended up remembering — remembering the way things were before. The boring diurnal round of his days at Selvage & Fleischman now seemed so comforting and compelling in light of all that had transpired. He thought about Mr. Templeton, the gray eminence who had once considered Lester his prize protégé, who now believed him a destructive influence. Ms. Alvarez had put in for a transfer to another department, not wanting to be associated with such an "oddball" as Lester. Templeton had made it pretty clear to Lester: He would have booted him out already were it not for the possibility that Lester might sue.

Sue? What a laugh, thought Lester. How would you sue the ravings of a schizophrenic mind or, for that matter, the alternate reality created just for you alone by some alien intelligence?

He drank more and more, his only release these days, and found himself slowly but surely descending once again into a state bordering on oblivion so

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black that the boundaries between self and non-self faded and grew obscure. He lay on the sofa, muttering and mewling to himself, sighing every now and then over the wreck of his life, and then crying out, at last, his new realization, one that should have been so obvious so long ago:

It's not the days that should have been different. I was blaming the world for my own cowardice. It's me! Me! Me! I want to be different!

And, as before, the someone or something that listened and pulled Lester back from the void — which had been listening and watching his plight all along during the last few weeks — was there again with a helping hand and a receptive ear.

Lester rode the elevator up to his office, thinking, even before he left his apartment that morning, that something was truly different today. He had woken that morning from a fathomless sleep, feeling unexpectedly refreshed. He had gone about his morning ablutions with incredible alacrity and dispatch — shaving, dressing as one possessed. He had made the effort, unusual for him, to be just a little more casual in his attire, a little less proper. It was a start, he reasoned.

The elevator door slid open and people parted before him like wheat as he rushed toward his office. Ms. Alvarez fled as he approached, but it didn't make an impression on him. He entered his office and began working, typing, filing, cross-indexing, writing memos and letters at a furious pace so that by ten he had finished what normally would have been a full day's work.

He opened the door for his meeting with Mr. Templeton, and his boss stared at him, eyes agog. Lester sat in the armchair. Templeton stood up, ashen-white, and ran from the office.

I'm not dressed that casually, mused Lester — adjusting his tie with one hand, unbuttoning his suit jacket with the other, combing what little hair he had with his third hand and examining the long delicate nails on his fourth — wondering what unpleasant surprises the world had in store for him today.

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J. Steven York is best known for his short shockingly funny stories published in Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine. *His stories have also appeared in a number of anthologies, including* Writers of the Future. *He is, along with his wife, a past editor of* The Report.

Steve wrote "Unmarked Crossing" at a writers workshop held in an Oregon beach house near a railroad track. An unmarked railroad track. The dog in the story is based on the late, lamented writer-friendly sheltie Bertie Johnson.

The Unmarked Crossing

By J. Steven York

MARS GLOWS BRIGHTLY JUST over the horizon, casting ghostly reflections on the waves. I look up at the sky, and my mind wanders. I hear the echoing cry of a slow freight train, winding its way along the track behind our beach house, back beyond the dunes.

Then, the familiar itching in the back of my skull, the thoughts, unbidden, come into my head. I am having a vision.

My mind's eye blinks away the sleep, and I see the grade crossing behind the house, marked with only a small wooden sign, easily missed in the darkness.

The horn sounds again. It is a lonesome, mournful sound, like a prehistoric beast, the last of its kind, calling a mate that will never come. In my mind's eyes, I can see the locomotive, rocking down the track, clattering its way over the old steel bridge a few miles north, pulling its load of empty log cars from the mill up the coast.

I think of the crossing, and the car that rolls up to the crossing, tires

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crackling and popping on the gravel, stopping squarely across the track. The woman driving is lost. She takes a map from a glove compartment and turns on the dome light.

I look across the dunes, and can see the light in the upper floor bedroom of my beach house. Behind it is the railroad, and just beyond, the highway. I think about the train, and try to estimate how far it is from the crossing.

She missed the turnoff for the freeway, thirty miles back. The intersection is poorly marked, and the moon is only now rising. People get lost there all the time. She studies the map intently. What was the name of the little town she just passed through? She can't remember.

I begin walking up the beach, looking for the path between the beach front houses that will lead me to the street. I stumble in the darkness, and the dry grass that grows in the dunes stabs through the thin cloth of my slacks. I find the trail again, and quicken my pace.

The woman spots the right town on the map, but decides that she can't possibly have gone that far wrong. She scans the highway, twenty miles south of where she actually is, looking for landmarks she will never find. She hears the train, but thinks of it only as a geographical reference. The track is nowhere near the road she is looking at, but she is looking at the wrong road.

I come down the dunes between the houses across from my beach house. There is a streetlight, and I can see well enough to run now. Ahead of me is a small hill, and on the other side, the grade crossing. I am running, but I am out of shape. I haven't run more than twenty steps in years, and the little hill looms large before me. The locomotive cries out in warning. I can hear the bell ringing now.

The woman is confused by the noise. She looks around, but the dome light prevents her from seeing much in the darkness. She looks back at the paper just as the train rounds the bend, its headlight lighting up the highway behind the car. If she would only look up, she would see it coming, but she is looking at the map.

My legs pump weakly as I top the hill, lungs burning, eyes closed, I stumble and nearly fall, but I know the crossing is just ahead.

The locomotive sounds its horn, so close and loud now that it is painful. I grab my left ear and run on.

The woman looks up, sees the locomotive bearing down on her. She tries to start the car, but she has left the lights on. Her battery is weak, and the

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starter only clicks, like the click of the locomotive's wheels as it bears down on her.

I run down the hill as fast as I can.

I stumble and nearly fall.

I feel the sound of the approaching train as much as I hear it.

I open my eyes and the crossing is just ahead.

There is no car.

Only a dog.

It is a small collie of some kind. It sniffs at something between the rails, oblivious to the train about to run it over, even as the behemoth sounds its final warning.

Stupid creature. It must be deaf as a stump.

I put my last reserves into a final burst of speed.

I trip on the gravel ballast next to the track, and turn it into a dive. I catch the dog around the middle, my shoulder striking the far rail painfully as I roll. I think the dog yelps as I hit it, but I cannot hear.

We roll down the bank, and splash into a shallow ditch.

The train rumbles past, without having even slowed.

I kneel in the mud, my injured shoulder hunched like Quasimodo as I listen to the train's wheels ringing across the joints in the rail like huge bells.

The dog licks my face.

I am elated.

Then I hear the crash, the scream of crumpled metal, as the train strikes the car stalled at the next crossing.

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Robin Wilson has just completed a whodunnit for St. Martin's Press. Titled Death by Degrees, *the book is one of three Wilson books on St. Martin's list. The other two are writing books.* Those Who Can *is a reissue of Robin's 1973 SF text-anthology.* Those Who Can II *is under contract and, in Robin's words, "under construction."*

In the midst of all these book projects, he still finds time to write us an occasional short story. "The Retired Men's Social Club & Ladies' Auxiliary" is an off-beat look at what should be a staid institution — and of course never really is.

The Retired Men's Social Club & Ladies' Auxiliary

By Robin Wilson

PEOPLE HAD CALLED EDWARD Jay Elson "Pop" ever since 1952, when at twenty-eight he was promoted from journeyman lineman to pusher on the 300 KVA line they were stringing down the Feather River Canyon from the new Caribou hydro station. Now newly into his seventies, a tall, lean man whose shock of white hair and weathered face at last suited the nickname, he continued to display the good nature that had earned it. He was "Pop" because of his paternal care for the men who worked for him as he rose through the blue collar ranks in Pacific Gas and Electric; a nice guy who had paid his way in the world with quiet, unassuming kindness.

Which, he supposed — being a man of self-knowledge but limited religious conviction — made it a balancing of scales according to some vast eternal plan, that he be rewarded for a life of modest good works with the sudden removal of the cancerous tumor that had grown long undetected in the dark of his groin like some mysterious truffle.

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Whatever the ultimate cause — God or Nature or simply The Way Things Are — the proximate instrument of his sudden return to health was a small, golden cylinder held with sure purpose in the six-fingered left hand of one of the three little guys with bald and bulbous heads and luminous kid eyes who, late on a March Saturday afternoon, sucked him up from his Sears aluminum bass boat into their strange, organic craft, one toroidal end of which hovered briefly over a snaky little inlet of Lake Oroville.

"Thing like one of those little Magna-Lite flashlights," he told Arnie Heckshire at nine-thirty on the following Saturday morning in the storefront clubroom on Third Street in Oroville's shabby old downtown. "Except it was kinda gold colored and hummed." The ancient Wurlitzer in the corner writhed purple and played a mournful Crystal Gayle.

"Yeah, right," said Arnie, a friend of fifty years and fellow member of the Retired Men's Social Club & Ladies' Auxiliary. He was not a morning person, hated Saturday clean ups. He shrugged his narrow shoulders and tugged the belt on his Expansoslacks up over his prolapsed abdomen, "Okay, I'll bite. What's the gag?"

"I'm not kiddin'. It really happened." Pop's voice was low, intense, his face serious. He pulled the front of his blue polo shirt free from his pants, unbuckled them, and slipped the waistband down over a pelvis still flat and hard to reveal in the dim morning light of the barroom a small, pink, puckering blemish.

"Shit," said Arnie, shaking his head to scoff away his growing credulity. "Looks like a goddamn hickey, like where maybe Marianne bit you, you been doin' that kinda thing lately." If Pop's tale was even partly true, Arnie was hurt that Pop hadn't confided his affliction.

Pop accepted Arnie's sour skepticism. It was certainly justifiable. He shrugged, tucked in his shirt, and began to fill the sink behind the bar with hot water.

After half a century of conversation, Arnie was pretty sure he knew truth from trash when it came from Pop. But disbelief is a faith slow to die. He said almost nothing for the next two hours as the two went about their chores in the club's help-yourself bar, now illuminated only by one bare ceiling bulb, the Wurlitzer working its way through its stack on automatic, and a gleam of morning sun coming in above the cracked black paint on the street-side display windows.

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The club was the social focus for a few dozen elderly people of modest means who wanted a place away from the TV set to talk about the sins of their kids, the virtues of their grandchildren, the follies of those sonsabitches in Washington, and their discomfort with change, any kind of change. They could play a little penny-ante or gin and drink a couple of unlicensed beers at lower than barroom prices. They knew they had a uniquely good thing going, but all was contingent on the benign neglect of the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board and a system of grumbling volunteers. There were no paid employees.

And so in teams of two, the members took turns tending bar, cleaning up the place, buying and storing stock, and seeing to rent and maintenance. This week it was Pop and Arnie's turn to share the morning clean-up after a busy Friday night. They washed the glassware, swept up the litter left by the forty-five club members and their friends and relatives, including auxiliaries, cased the empties, wiped down the two dozen battered tables, and restocked the cooler.

Finished half an hour before the next duo would arrive to open the club for the day, they sat on adjoining bar stools — an elderly Mutt and Jeff — to have a first beer. Arnie took a long pull on his bottle of Anchor Steam to wash down Pop's story, and broke his long silence: "Jeez, Pop. You aren't kiddin' are you."

"Nope." Pop expected skepticism, could himself hardly believe what had happened was not just an old man's dream. But there was the scar and the featureless X-ray on Monday at the clinic, and the guys in the white coats with stethoscopes around their necks shaking their heads and muttering stuff about must be some mistake, wrong file.

"So," said Arnie. "Din it hurt?

"Nah. They kept their thumbs outta the way."

"Shit. Don't joke me, man. I mean *you*!"

Pop shook his head. "Nothin'. No blood, no pain. Like you can see, not hardly any scar. And no friggin' bill!"

"Medicare covered it, hey?"

"No! I mean there was no charge. They done it for free, only asked me to, you know, kinda pass the word."

This last was too much for Arnie. He took another long pull on his beer. "You mean they want to do more — uh — operations?"

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"What they said."

"Want you to find 'em more people need something taken out?"

"Guess so."

"And you're telling me all this...?"

Pop drained his bottle, head thrown back, Adam's apple bobbing. Empty back on the old galvanized sheet metal bar with a solid clunk. "Ah," he said. "Yeah. I'm telling you most of all 'cause you aren't worth a cup fulla cold piss but you're about the oldest and best friend I got and, basically, who else is gonna believe something as fuckin' *weird* as this? And second I know you got that prostate thing worries you and..." He paused to find an afterthought that would mask emotion. "...hell, I promised those guys that were in, you know, in that thing over the lake, that I'd find other customers for 'em."

Arnie was deeply touched by Pop's concern for him, but he would not show it. He said, "Hah! Customers! You said customers! Somebody buyin' something from somebody. So what's the deal? Whaddaya pay 'em in, some kinda Klingon goodies outta that Star Trek show? They after — ah — earthling nooky? You got some a those girls from over at, like, Monique's Massage and Manicure out there in your bass boat?"

"No," said Pop quietly. "Said all they wanted was to keep the parts. Whatever they took out you didn't need anymore. Said they were...harvesting."

Patsy Cline fell to pieces on the Wurlitzer.

Late that afternoon, feeling foolish, half expecting a bunch of giggling people from the club to show up on one of those party houseboats they rent at the marina, Arnie sat waiting in the bow of Pop's battered boat as Pop, trolling motor humming just enough to counter a gentle eddy, sat in the stern, half-heartedly casting a plastic rattlin' lunger into the weeds along the bank.

"You know," Arnie said, "I wouldn't a done this except the guy at the Elderclinic, that black doc, he told me it was probably gonna be surgery, and odds on gettin' it up afterwards ain't all that hot."

"All you think of?" said Pop, trying to make light.

"Well I ain't ready to hang it up yet, Pop."

"Yeah. Course you're not," said Pop, sympathy in his voice. "Nobody ever is, and I think you're smart for takin' a shot at this. I mean, what do any of us our age have to lose? Lot of people, young guys, I mean when I was a young guy, I figured when you're up in your sixties, up there, and you're on

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retirement and the kids're gone and the damn dog has died and you're sittin' back takin' it easy, well you quit worryin' about makin' money and chasin' tail and like that, but — yeah — the pension's okay and the social security helps a lot and we got the doublewide paid for and it is kinda easy street, and Marianne and me, we still have a round and round she goes every once in a while. So hell, I don't blame you gettin' shook about what that guy, that black doc told you. I would of too, it was me."

Modesty did not permit him to tell Arnie of his first post-operative week when, unworried for the first time in months by the thing growing in his groin, he had chased a giggling Marianne around the doublewide more than once. He retrieved his hook and switched to a fresh angel fly. The boat shivered briefly. He looked up and Arnie was gone, just like that.

ALTHOUGH ARNIE'S puckery little pink scar was not in a place where he could show it to others, or indeed see it himself without some uncomfortable contortions and a hand mirror borrowed from his wife's dressing table — one of those jobs that magnifies; the first view, pucker or no, horrifying him — he was a satisfied customer.

Once again, the Elderclinic provided confirmation. Arnie turned his head and coughed, the black doc withdrew his gloved finger and shook his head and ordered a new round of X-rays. Arnie dressed, went down the hall to the sign that said "X-ray" with an arrow pointing left, and turned right, a spring in his step. Home again, he shared his good news with his Louella, who received it with mixed but on the whole positive emotions and who quickly shared the tale with a couple of other auxiliary ladies.

Word spread in the club. By Memorial Day, Pop had ferried nine more people out to the inlet: Annie Hague with the lump in her left breast, Chuck Binder with the growth they said probably wasn't cancerous yet but we'd better do a biopsy anyway and watch it, Sandy Teeters and the thing in his colon, and a bunch of others who didn't say and Pop didn't ask. Every Saturday afternoon for two and a half months, he had sat in rain and sun, wind and calm, fishing — almost always without catching anything worth keeping — while the harvest went on and the membership of the Retired Men's Social Club & Ladies' Auxiliary grew progressively healthier, progressively more satisfied with things just the way they were.

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By the 4th of July it was five more — two lumpectomies, a pulmonary node, and two unknowns — and Pop was growing weary. No, far more than weary: sick to death of dealing with problems ranging from sick to death.

"I'm sorry about the kids," he apologized to Marianne on the Tuesday after the 4th, as they sat in the cluttered little kitchen in the doublewide. Marianne had just hung up from talking with the daughter in Visalia they had been scheduled to visit. "I just couldn't get away," said Pop. "Don't know what I'd of said to Herb Green if he hadn't of got whatever was eatin' on him cut out."

"But you're supposed to be *retired*," said Marianne. "You've been out on that damn lake every Saturday since I don't know when."

"Yeah, Mare, I know. But what am I gonna do? Who'm I gonna say no to? And what the hell, it's only one afternoon a week for me but it's like the whole rest of their lives for some of these people."

"Well, can't you get Arnie or Pete or one the other men to take 'em out in the boat?"

"Tried it. Twice. Tried it different times, too. If I'm not there and it's any time but around 5:30 on a Saturday afternoon, nothin' happens."

"Story of our life," sighed Marianne. "Ever since just after Marcy was born, when you got that pusher's job up at Caribou. You're not there, nothing happens. You're there, everything supposed to happen, happens."

"So what'll I do, babe? How do I get free from this monkey around my neck?" Pop's voice held more puzzlement than self-pity.

Marianne reached across the white enameled-steel kitchen table and took one of Pop's strong hands in hers. She felt as much as saw its tiny tremor. "Eddie honey, I don't know. It's maybe only one afternoon a week now, but pretty soon when word gets around, then it's going to be all day every day sorting people out, deciding who goes and who doesn't go and figuring out what to say to the ones who don't."

She sighed and swept her eyes around the snug little room, the contents moved from house to house, always the heart of their forty-eight years together. She said, "I say you're retired and the company and the social security, they've said you've done your share, and you oughta give the whole thing up. Just walk away from it."

Pop nodded. "Yeah, you're right. But you know, nothing lasts forever. Those guys up there in that thing, they're gonna have something better to do,

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get all the — uh — harvest they need. Someday I'm going to go out there and nobody's gonna be home, and *then* I can quit."

"Someday, sure. But Eddie, you just might not last all the way to someday."

He nodded, feeling his age. "Uh-huh. In the meantime, what am I gonna do first Saturday I *don't* go and somebody's floppin' around over at Community Memorial Hospital I could of, you know, saved. How the hell do you retire from *that*?"

By the morning after Labor Day, the membership of the Retired Men's Social Club & Ladies' Auxiliary was the healthiest collection of senior citizens outside the fabled tribes of Kazakhstani goatherds. They all knew they had a very good thing, and no deductibles either. Pop, whose tremor had increased markedly as his weight had dropped — enough to genuinely frighten Marianne — sat that Tuesday morning at a card table wedged in among cases of bottled beer and potato chips, as he always did now, Mondays through Fridays, from eight to five, and sometimes into the evening. His days were consumed working with Arnie and whatever volunteers he could dragoon from the membership to sort through the piles of applications, medical reports, and pitiful pleas that were delivered in ever-bigger postal bags to the back room of the club. And then there was a long envelope from County Health and a fat packet with a federal frank from the Department of Health and Human Services addressed to "Provider." He was afraid to open either.

Arnie, whose new lease on life with a healthy prostate had led him to some serious dieting and exercise and who now felt a vigor that was causing interesting problems at home, worried about his friend. "You know, Pop, this's just gonna get worse."

"I know. In the classifieds last night, in the *Courier*? Somebody had one of those prayers to St. Jude, mentioned me by name."

"Figure you got some direct connection to God I bet."

"Hell, I'm not even Catholic."

"Well, lot of people around here figure you're wired into something up there." Arnie paused, deeply embarrassed by the direction of the conversation but unable to change it. "Hey, Pop," he said hesitantly, "You believe in some of that stuff? I mean, is there something goin' on in that department I don't know about?"

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Pop dropped the National Institutes of Health *Taxonomy of Title 4 Surgical Procedures* someone had sent to bolster his case for a ride in the bass boat. He shook his head. "No, Arnie. I'm just as bummed by all this as you are. I mean, I don't know if there's something other'n those three little bald guys up there in that thing. You know; you been up there. I mean, if there is some God somewhere who's, like, quarterbackin' this whole deal, I sure don't know anything about it. I figure if there's a God or if there isn't a God, who'm I to know? Like the chicken and the egg thing. Which one come first? If the egg come first, who laid it? If the chicken come first, who made the egg it hatched from? And either way you got to imagine God, if you can imagine God, if there *is* a God, can you imagine God sittin' on some egg to hatch it?"

He picked up another document headed *HHS Schedule 5* and rattled it. He was tired and a little angry. "I got better things to worry about," he said. "If people think I'm wired to God or St. Jude or for Christ's sake AT&T or Sprint or MCI, that's okay. I know I'm not."

Arnie's new vigor had sharpened some brain cells, too. He had a sudden insight. "Ah shit, Pop!" he said, a grin splitting his round old face. "That's it, ol' buddy. You *are* wired. That's why the bass boat deal only works when you're there."

Excited, Arnie rose to pace between cases, snapping his fingers. "Figures they're not just settin' up there twiddlin' their thumbs all week waitin' for Saturday. They gotta have some way of knowin' when you show up with something they can — uh — harvest. They musta, them guys up there in that thing, they musta put something in when they took that thing outta you, back there, back in March. Something like that gizmo they stick into bears and deers so's they can track 'em, or that thing, in cop stories on TV, you know, that thing they stick up under the tailpipe of a crook's car so's they can follow him around."

The logic was compelling. The truth overwhelming. Neither man doubted that Pop must have something stuck up under his tailpipe.

Because they had been wise enough to eschew formal leadership, let those who wanted to run things do so unless and until they angered too many members, the Retired Men's Social Club & Ladies' Auxiliary seldom held anything that could be called a meeting, or took a vote, or formed factions, cliques, alliances, cabals, or blocs. Hence they generally drank and smoked

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together in unfashionable peace and complained about whose turn it was to do what and with which but without real animosity, although like all volunteers they took their pay in bitching rights.

The first Saturday evening after Labor Day was as close as they had come to a formal meeting since the decision to buy the Wurlitzer two years before. Pop was absent, presumably resting up as usual after an arduous afternoon on the lake. But after Arnie had shared the supposition that Pop probably had something stuck in him somewhere that ought to be removed, the rest of the club spent a noisy but generally good-natured three hours in a series of debates.

To their credit, although they all realized it might be the end of the best health plan in America, the burden of discussion was not whether but how. A D-Day veteran proposed an Entebbe-style raid during which the duty ER surgeon at Community Memorial could be forced at gunpoint to look for and remove the whatever.

"Yeah," said Chuck Binder, who'd been a sheriff's deputy for thirty-five years, "that's about fifteen felonies, and what planet do we all go to live on when we're done?"

Some of the lady auxiliaries who'd served on school or union committees or negotiated deals to exact a little civility from their teenage children suggested a meet-and-confer session with County Health. "Lay out the situation in detail," said Marge Fromm. "Get the support of the medical professionals."

Mary Orton, who in forty years as a rural nurse practitioner had done at least as much good doctoring as the Mayo brothers, snorted. Said nothing in the ensuing silence, just snorted again, and Marge's suggestion died.

The debate rumbled to a halt at a little after ten when Pop, still unrested from his day in the bass boat, appeared with Marianne and the black doc, a skinny guy with a grizzled beard who was thirty years younger than anyone else in the place. Pop was a little shaky, but with Marianne's help, he stood by the bar, carefully avoiding leaning against it, and held up his hand. "Lot of you know Doctor Waitson from over at the Elderclinic...."

"For you that don't know me," said Waitson, grinning, "I'm the one they call the black doc. I'll let you guess why. Anyway, last couple of months I've seen enough clear X-rays I didn't understand that now I'm ready to go along with what Mr. Elson here was telling me earlier this evening. So I'm with you for a while on this thing."

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"What we gotta do," said Pop, "is we gotta kind of reorganize things around here on account I'm not getting any younger."

Cries of "Come on, you're still a kid!" and "I got underwear older'n you!"

Pop held up a hand. "What we gotta do is have what they used to call in P-G 'n E a division of labor. Doc Waitson here, he'll take on what he calls the triage, sortin' out the people who need what they can get from one of our boat trips from those that don't."

Cheers and whistles from the volunteers Pop had coerced into back room paperwork.

Waitson said, "Whoever I send you for a boat trip's got nothing to do with medicine. You understand what I'm saying? I got a license to worry about. And the folks come here at my recommendation? They aren't necessarily going to be much like you. They'll be from around here, in the county all right, but some will be poor and some will be rich and some will talk with funny accents and the odds are more will be some different color than won't be."

No cheers. Thoughtful silence. Throats clearing. Chairs squeaking. The black doc thought, this'll maybe kill it, this is a whole other thing. This is too big a change.

On the Wurlitzer Randy Travis said we ain't out of love yet.

"And the other thing is this here gizmo..." Pop pulled from his shirt pocket a baggie with a plump golden needle gleaming in it. "...which Doc pulled outta my, well, outta *me* about an hour ago."

Somebody unplugged the Wurlitzer. The room was as still as a buggy whip auction. Pop looked around, a little worried. One way or another, they had to stick together on this thing. "It didn't hurt goin' in," he said. "It didn't hurt comin' out. I didn't even know it was in there. And for as long as those funny-lookin' geeks come around, as long as it's harvest time over on Lake Oroville, someone's gotta have this thing slipped into him..."

Marianne poked him, gently.

"...or *her* so's we can go on doin' the good things we been doin'. Only thing is, you gotta be able to run a bass boat or be willin' to learn how to run a bass boat, and you gotta be available out at the lake around five o'clock every Saturday afternoon, rain or shine. It'll be like takin' the duty for clean-up here, only maybe a little more uncomfortable and for longer, maybe a month at a time.

"So okay. Any volunteers?" He rattled the baggie, its clatter noisy in the silence. "Show a hands?"

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The costs had changed and so had the benefits. Slowly, quietly, glancing at one another and then away, one after another, every member of the Retired Men's Social Club & Ladies' Auxiliary stood up and pushed their chairs back under the tables, ready to step off into the Oroville night. And then, hesitantly, every hand but one went up.

Hands in his pockets, Arnie said, "How many Saturday morning clean-ups do we get off for one tour in the bass boat?" ☙

"Honestly, Alice, you see one UFO you've seen 'em all."

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According to publishing circle rumors, Adam-Troy Castro has written one of the best unfinished novels in the business. If he ever finishes the novel, he has more than one editor awaiting the manuscript. Of course, instead of finishing the novel, Adam is finishing short stories.

"Locusts" is one of the creepiest novelets we have read in a long, long time. It also inspired David Hardy's cover, not to mention a few editorial sleepless nights.

Locusts

By Adam-Troy Castro

1.

ONE GOT IN JUST BEFORE dawn. That's when they always got in. That's when the skies just opened up with billions of them, and the thumpthumpthump of their tiny forms smashing against the house became the only sound in the known universe. That's when the few of us still left alive huddled together in Sharon's basement under an old canvas tarpaulin, spending the night as we always did, breathing each others' breath, smelling each others' sweat, feeling each others' sanity wither beneath the constant tattoo of little bodies smashing against brick walls.

Then the pounding meant nothing, because all of a sudden there was a Locust flying around *in the room with us*, her gossamer wings making soft whispery sounds as they feather-dusted the soot from the ceiling. She made a low pass over our heads, chittering in the high-pitched rhythmic tones I'd always imagined a form of sonar, showing no sign that she sensed us as anything other than a shapeless mound below her.

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We might have been able to hide from her forever, had my poor deaf, blind, and mad wife Jane not chosen that moment to start screaming again, with all five of her mouths at once.

"Stu!" Claudette hissed. "Stop her — "

She didn't get to say anything else. The Locust strafed us, her glittering rainbow-trail neatly slicing the tarpaulin, and Claudette's neck, like tissue paper. Her blood geysered against the underside of the canvas, splattering the rest of us like hot rain.

Jane just went on screaming. But by then her multiple voices were just a small part of the choir, because we were all screaming. Peter was screaming because Claudette had been his wife, and Sharon was screaming for everybody to stay calm dammit, and Bob was screaming because his shellshocked brain wasn't capable of anything else, and Nancy was screaming because she wanted everybody to know it was all Jane's fault, and I was screaming because I was scrabbling out from under the ruined tarpaulin, aerosol bug spray in hand, to face the Locust before it killed the rest of us.

It wasn't as dark in the basement as it should have been. The lights weren't working anymore; they hadn't worked in weeks, because nothing electrical worked anymore, not even flashlights — but the Locust emitted a soft white halo that lit up the whole room. Her rainbow trail was already fading into intangibility where it had sliced through Claudette, but the freshest sections, immediately behind her, shimmered and sparkled like a symphony of color, lending the room around us the trippy lighting of a fever dream. It was magical and ageless and Disneyesque and deadly.

As was the little monster itself, who turned in mid-air to face me. It was a rare thing, to get this close a look at a living one; mostly, the only ones we got to see were smashed and broken corpses. We'd never actually seen an ugly one, not even once in all the months since the skies first turned dark with them, but this one was a knockout, blessed with more than her share of the ageless, innocent, and utterly androgynous beauty they all possessed. Some of them had always been marginally identifiable as males, others as females; this one was lithe and athletic and cute and looked exactly like any other preadolescent mall brat, except that she was six inches tall, covered head to toe with a light pink down, and flitting through the air on colorful butterfly wings. As she giggled with high-pitched helium delight, I could have easily found myself too charmed into immobility to react. But her eyes —

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— the Locust smiled winsomely and went for me at full speed, a raindow blur cracking the air behind her like a whip.

I lit the bug spray and let the little bitch have a jet of white flame right in the face. She screeched and fell back, trailing black smoke. I kept the flame steady, even as she spiralled toward the floor, incinerating her, burning even the ashes, all the while screaming at the top of my lungs.

My friends and neighbors were still cowering under the remains of the tarpaulin when the can ran out of propellant, God alone knows how much later. I dropped it, knelt by the blackened smear on the basement floor, covered my face with my hands, and sobbed.

Sharon was the only one to come out of hiding to get me. She walked stiffly, and hesitantly, as if unsure the ground wouldn't open up under her feet. The Rorschach stains left by Claudette's blood were already beginning to dry on the remains of her blouse; they'd already dried on her prematurely graying hair, dying the silvered brown a shinier shade of black. She put a sticky hand on my shoulder and croaked, "That took balls, Stu."

I looked at my empty hands and said nothing.

"You saved us," she said.

The thing had had my daughter Rachel's eyes.

One of their favorite tricks: looking like somebody you loved, and wouldn't hurt in a million years.

But Rachel was gone. She wasn't dead. At least, I didn't think she was dead; she certainly wasn't human, but I didn't consider that dead. Those distinctions didn't mean as much as they used to. Suffice it to say that she wasn't exactly my daughter anymore...

I said, "So what?"

Sharon sat down beside me, respecting my need for silence, but unwilling to leave me alone.

As if any of us would ever be alone again, in the world ruled by Locusts.

2.

Our fellow survivors didn't emerge from underneath the tarpaulin until just before dawn, when the thumpthumpthump petered away to a dead silence, and Sharon went to open the doors that let daylight, of a kind, shine down into the basement where the last of the neighborhood's survivors spent

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their nights huddled in darkness. Even then they emerged only one or two at a time, starting with the once-arrogant, now haggard and freshly widowed Peter. He'd been an arrogant, buttoned-down, criminal lawyer, back when there was still such a thing as law, of either the legal or natural variety. He'd been a good one, too, with a reputation for bullying judges and getting away with it. But he'd seen something, early in the Plague, something which shattered him, rendered all his strength a lie, and left him speaking only in stutters and walking only with tiny, hesitant, beaten steps. He'd lost his children the same night Jane and I lost ours; he'd just lost Claudette, who'd managed to hold on to her strength until the very end; and what was left of him just wasn't very much. When Sharon hopped up and put her arms around him, to whisper her usual little inadequate words of comfort, Peter didn't hear her. Peter didn't hear anything.

Nancy came out right behind him: hard, polished, elegant, sharp-as-a-razor's edge Nancy, who as usual didn't look upset at all, who instead looked rather pleased, as she always did when she emerged unscathed and thus superior to those who'd died. Even splattered with Claudette's blood, she remained in tight control, the only one of us who hadn't aged lifetimes in the past few weeks, the only one who in this awful new world actually seemed to thrive...a fact not a major surprise to those of us who'd had to endure living on the same block as her. Among other things, she'd been the kind of neighbor who liked making lists and complaining to the cops. She fixed her bright violet eyes on mine. "I think it's time we had a little talk," she said.

As always, there was a little added edge to the word "I." She gave it three syllables, which was appropriate, considering how frequently she used it to begin sentences.

"I'm not in the mood," I said.

"That's too bad. We should have had this out long ago."

There was no long ago, in this situation; the Locusts had only been around for three weeks. But Nancy was right. There'd always been a big hate brewing between us, for as long as we'd known each other; all the years she'd harassed us from her perch just down the block, I'd known it would finally come down to a confrontation. I'd just hoped it wouldn't come now, with the blood of another friend still drying on my shirt. "What do you want?"

"I want you to realize who just got Claudette killed."

Bob Something, who'd been a painting contractor working at the Johnsons' just around the bend, who had worked late the night the Locusts

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first started to fall and who had first staggered into our makeshift shelter incapable of speaking more than half a dozen coherent words at a time, emerged from beneath the tarpaulin, his bovine eyes as black and uncomprehending as any other dumb animal delivered to the slaughterhouse. Bob was even worse off than Peter; he'd regressed almost all the way to infancy. Oh, he managed sentences sometimes — but never anything clear enough to explain what had happened to him, or how the Johnsons had died, or where he'd picked up the disquieting burns that made rags of his paint-speckled overalls. He just shuffled around waiting for us to tell him what to do next...

That left only one figure still rocking back and forth under the tarpaulin — the one Nancy clearly held responsible for Claudette's death. Jane. I fixed Nancy with the kind of look I hoped would frighten her off. "Forget it."

"The little freak almost got us *all* killed," Nancy said. "It's time we got rid of her."

The figure under the torn tarpaulin moaned with five separate voices, none even remotely human, all begging wordlessly for a release that wouldn't come. I'd never been able to accept that as what had become of the woman I'd married. It didn't matter that I'd fallen out of love with her years ago, that I'd cheated on her frequently, that we'd discussed divorce often, and that we'd stayed together mostly out of inertia and misplaced concern for the children; she was still Jane...barely. I faced Nancy dead-on. "We don't throw anybody out. That's the rule. But we won't stop you from leaving if you can't live with it."

Nancy searched the room for somebody willing to join her in taking offense. But Peter was slipping into catatonia, Bob was not much better, and Sharon was staring at her with open hostility that once upon a time I never would have dreamt I'd see on her beautiful face. Disgusted, Nancy treated me with one last glare of compressed hate — the kind of look that leaves men afraid of having their throats slit while they sleep — then turned away and stomped up the stairs to the front yard.

Sharon and I met each other's eyes, recognizing there both the understanding that Nancy might be right, and the agreement that it didn't matter. We'd all lost everything: our children, our families, our civilization, the rational world, even, to varying degrees, our humanity. If we started evicting people to take their own chances with the Locusts, we'd be giving up the only part of ourselves that still made survival matter. The only part that separated us from somebody like Nancy.

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Bob blinked plaintively. "Eat?"

"Yeah," Sharon said, in a tone weary of everything. "Eat."

3.

About two weeks ago, there'd been a night of red fire that turned all the canned food within travelling distance to an inedible foul-smelling black tar. By then, of course, we'd already known that food was going to be a problem, sooner or later; we were running out of everything in our combined larder, and we'd learned the hard way that raiding the local supermarkets was a Very Bad Idea.

The only thing left to eat, now, was the same thing killing us.

The Locusts.

Every single morning, now, we staggered from Sharon's house — one of only three brick-masonry homes on the street — and into a once-fashionable suburban neighborhood now a landscape right out of hell. The wood-frame houses were all skeletal ruins, so honeycombed with Locust tunnels that only stubbornness kept them standing. The parked cars were all twisted, misshapen, semi-melted hulks, like sick compromises between Dali and Detroit. The sky was a multicolored haze of dissolving rainbow-trails. And the trees had all turned to something crystalline that made jarring music in high winds. But the worst thing around us remained the corpses of last night's Locusts; they'd fallen by the billions, and their smashed little bodies were ankle-deep in all directions. They were all naked, they were all dead, and they all looked like little winged people, but in the hours before the diamond-shaped sun burned them away, they were also all flesh and they could all be eaten. They even tasted nice; their skin had a tangy spice that tasted a lot like barbecued chicken.

But just because they tasted good, that didn't necessarily mean they were good to eat.

Sometimes the special sauce just didn't agree with you.

Today, as I knelt alongside the others picking through the grisly buffet, one hand keeping a tight grip on Jane's leash, I found myself thinking of Eddie for the first time in days. Eddie had been Sharon's husband, a security consultant by trade, and midlist crime novelist by inclination, who had first taken charge of our survival. It had been his idea for us to pool our resources

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defending one house instead of ten. He'd been responsible for dubbing them Locusts. He'd been the first one to take a bite out of one and pronounce them edible, and unfortunately, the first to find out the hidden risks...

...we'd all had Reactions. Some of us had experienced three or four or five, one on top of the other, each one transforming us a little, each one taking us a little bit further away from humanity. Some of the changes were funny, in a way: Bob had unnaturally big brown Keane-painting eyes, Peter was now covered by a layer of bright yellow fuzz, Sharon had cat's whiskers and three extra fingers on each hand, I had a ridge of jagged spines along both shoulders, and Nancy had a forked tongue and featureless slit where she'd once sported lips. We were all lucky, if you considered what had happened to Eddie, or what had happened to our children...or what had happened to Jane.

We all grazed anyway — albeit by and large separately, afraid to meet each other's eyes. It wasn't like we had any choice.

After about twenty minutes, Sharon worked her way over to me, pretending to be casual. Only a total paranoid would have seen conspiratorial in her manner, but we were all paranoid, and to me, it seemed as blatant as all hell. When she reached my side, she flashed a brave little smile, raised a little winged figure to her mouth and bit off its head. Three bites later, she'd swallowed it down, and stopped smiling. "Christ, Stu. We're down to six. Can you believe we're down to six?"

I winced. "Pretty pathetic, isn't it?"

"Tragic is what it is," she said desolately. "I keep trying to tell myself that it can't last forever, that sooner or later we'll learn the rules and get through this — and sometimes I even manage to believe it — but it's just not happening that way, is it? At this rate we're not even going to make it through the week."

I'd privately come to the same conclusion, but it hurt to hear it coming from Sharon. "You can't say that. For all we know, we might already be through the worst of it."

"Yeah. And maybe everything we've seen so far is just a coming attraction for whatever comes next."

She turned away then, hugging herself tightly to deny the spasms threatening to shake her to pieces. She didn't cry, of course; she'd always been the kind of person capable of fighting off tears when she had to. But it was a struggle...and though I ached for the words capable of giving her hope again,

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there just weren't any in me, and I was pretty sure that they would have been lies anyway. The best I could do was reach out and squeeze her shoulder, as she pulled herself together...and even then she flinched from my touch, not wanting anything to do with me until she was finished.

When she spoke again, it was without turning around. "This isn't even what I wanted to talk to you about. I wanted to talk about...her."

I frowned. "Who?"

"You know who I mean. I think she's going to be a problem."

I glanced at Nancy, who was about twenty yards away, scouring the carnage for the Locusts that looked safest to eat. As I watched, she lifted a tiny corpse to her mouth and unceremoniously bit off its legs. It emitted a high-pitched scream, as they tended to do whenever they weren't quite dead. She chewed, apparently unbothered. I shuddered. "She's always been a problem. So?"

"So," Sharon faced me again, "I think she's planning something."

Out of reflex, I glanced at my wife, afraid she'd hear us. Force of habit, really. I was still always a bit guilty talking to Sharon when Jane was around. But Jane couldn't hear or see anything. Not without eyes or ears. As far as she was concerned, this was only mealtime, and as she busily scooped up enough bodies to satisfy her multiple mouths, I protectively tightened my grip on the rope that kept her from wandering off. "Like what? A coup d'état? Declaring herself group leader and sentencing Jane to death? That's ludicrous. Nobody would stand for that. They all hate her too much."

"That may have been true when there were twenty of us," Sharon said, licking a spot of blood from the corner of her mouth. "And when there were fifteen, and when there were ten. When she was completely outnumbered by people who couldn't stand her but had taken her in only because it was the decent thing to do. That's changed, Stu. Now we're all walking wounded, and she's the only one left as strong as she ever was."

"She still wouldn't try anything," I said, with fading certainty. "We outnumber her five to one."

Her whiskers twitched. "By what accounting? Jane's helpless, Bob's only slightly better, and once Peter gets over the shock of what's happened, his first thought is naturally going to be that Jane got his wife killed. Because as far as that goes, Nancy actually has a point. That leaves just you and me, against her. And I really don't think she's going to wait until the odds are even money.

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She hates us too much."

I looked at Nancy, who was even now wading through the little corpses to the place where Peter stood alone, too shellshocked to forage. We were too far away to hear her false sympathy, but I was sure I knew what it would sound like: *Come on, Dear. I know it's hard. But you've got to keep fighting. You've got to keep up your strength. It's what Claudette would have wanted. Don't thank me, I've only got your interests at heart...*

Smooth talk like that wouldn't work on Peter, I thought. The man had lived his whole life dealing with smooth talk. He wouldn't be swayed by a woman who'd spent her own life spying on neighbors with binoculars and filing police complaints on kids who dared play their stereos for an hour upon returning from school. I couldn't imagine that. Could I?

"She won't stop," Sharon said, wiping an unwashed lock of hair from her eyes. "Ever. Remember when she found out about you and me?"

I couldn't forget. The woman had taken so much malicious pleasure in telling everybody the sordid details that it must have killed her when the marriages, if not the friendships, eventually survived. "You've made your point," I said. "But I'll be damned if I know what we can do about it."

"You know exactly what we can do about it."

I started to tell her it was out of the question, that it was crazy, that there were some lines I just wouldn't cross, even that when the craziness started, Eddie had taken me in, despite all the bad history between us...

Then, somewhere behind me, Bob screamed.

4.

IT WAS THE KIND of high bubbling scream that emerges only when no scream can be enough to express the pain. Eddie had screamed that way when he was crushed to jelly by his own constricting ribs. Frank had screamed that way when his guts came shooting out his mouth like novelty snakes. Jane had screamed that way when her eyes and ears became empty sockets lined with sharp clacking teeth. We all knew the sound. It was the sound people make when their humanity is ripped away, and we all lived in terror of the inevitable day when we'd make it ourselves.

Bob made that sound now, right behind me.

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Sharon happened to be facing him when it happened, and I could tell from the look in her eyes that it was bad. I turned, and saw him writhing on the ground, clutching his right arm. It was longer than his arm had any right to be. Shinier, too. And redder. And it came to a point that glowed like a miniature star...

Sharon had already recognized the object for what it was, and was diving for cover against the side of the house. My realization was just a fraction of a second slower, but when the truth sunk in, my heart almost burst from shock.

It was something we'd seen only once before, the day we lost our children. The day my daughter came skipping in from outside to show Mommy and Daddy what she'd found...

...a changestone.

"Christ!" I shouted, flinging Jane to one side. "Bob, don't move that thing —"

He convulsed with agony, swinging his transformed arm through the air before him. The pointy end trailed a cloud of oddly incandescent dust. Dust that gave off the sound of wind chimes as it ignited the ground with glowing green fire.

Somewhere a million miles away, Peter and Nancy were screaming for somebody to let them know what was happening. Jane was crawling around on the ground, chattering panic in half a dozen alien voices. Sharon was circling behind Bob, looking for her first opportunity to bring him down. I didn't have the time to deal with any of them: not with Bob casting random uncontrolled change in every direction. I leaped away from a puff of glowing dust, only narrowly escaping whatever it would have done to me, and again shouted for Bob to get down. He convulsed a second time, and something very much like a flaming rocket left his transformed hand and shot into the sky, exploding in the air somewhere high above us.

No longer capable of anything except trying to throw away the burning thing attached to his arm, Bob drew back for another useless swing.

It was the only chance I'd get. I leaped over the glowing green place and clutched at his wrist.

Once again, Sharon was faster than me. She'd already grabbed Bob from behind, one arm wrapped around his neck, the other pulling his arm into a half-nelson. In his struggles, he whirled, lifting her off the ground and swinging her legs against my side. I tripped, compensated, reached out to help Sharon hold his arms behind his back.

Through his pain he recognized me, with a pathetically trusting "Stu...?"

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"Yes," I gasped.

"...HURTS..."

"...I know..."

He shuddered uncontrollably. His arm seized up. Another cloud of dust exploded from the wand, momentarily hiding Sharon's face from view. I heard her choking on it, heard the moan that let me know it had done something to her, and the little cry as she released Bob and stepped back, in a belated attempt to escape. Some of the dust landed on my hands and tingled painfully, as magic started to work there too, but I couldn't run away screaming the way I wanted to; I just forced Bob to the ground, pinned his arm to his side, and kneeled on his back to keep him from getting up again.

The ground he'd zapped had turned to polished emerald. I found it difficult to care.

Peter was shaking. Nancy was giving me a look not far removed from a triumphant smile. Jane was crawling around obliviously, stuffing little Locust bodies into her collection of hungry salivating mouths. Sharon was nowhere to be seen.

"Hurts," Bob said.

"Sharon?" I called.

There was no answer.

"SHARON!"

I could see the others looking around, too, their eyes just dawning with the realization that she was gone.

Except for Nancy's.

Meeting her gaze, I realized she knew.

She'd seen what I'd been too busy to see, and it had made her day. And she didn't mind me knowing it. Quite the contrary — she was, typically, really getting off on being the one who hoarded the bad news...

"HURTS!" Bob moaned.

First things first: I turned my attention away from Nancy, and toward poor Bob's metamorphosis. The physical changes were most obvious below the wrist, but it was easy to see the energy of the changestone coursing through the flesh of his upper arm. It traveled in bursts of light, each pulsating like a little explosion, each white-hot with the kind of fire that didn't need to burn to scar you. The changestone itself wasn't able to contain it; the sparkling dust puffed from the glowing tip every time he took a breath.

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My hands throbbed. I didn't want to know what had been done to them.

Peter pulled himself together enough to yank me from my paralysis: "S-shouldn't we be...doing something?"

I said, "Go search the house for belts. Ropes. Anything we can use to keep this arm strapped to his side. Also a sheet to wrap it in. Maybe if we keep it contained it won't be as dangerous."

"You don't really believe that," Nancy said.

She was right, but I faced her down anyway. Giving in to her on this would be giving in to her on everything. She'd be the boss, the way she'd always wanted to be.

I said, "Now."

She went. No further argument. Somehow, that didn't make me feel any better. Especially since she went with a big broad smile on her face, and Peter followed close behind her, as clingingly as a lost puppy.

I remained where I was, kneeling atop a transformed man I'd barely known, within sight of the transformed woman I'd married, achingly aware of the missing transformed woman I'd loved, feeling the magic work its damage on my skin, thinking of nothing but the Locusts, the tiny, adorable Locusts, coming again tonight, in the billions. I remembered seeing them on television, that first time: that live aerial shot of Manhattan, just before sundown, covered from end to end with a great writhing carpet of them, just like a corpse being devoured by ants. I remembered some of the buildings actually changing recognizably, under that barrage, in ways my human eyes refused to accept. I remembered the President breaking in on the coverage to announce that the army had pronounced them contained. The strange things that had started happening to his face just before the networks went to test pattern forever.

I knelt there, on Bob's chest, trying not to look at the leering face that had appeared on the sun, and remembered what it had been like to once think there was could be a limit to the madness...

5.

Inside. Later. The Children's Room. A chamber filled with kid-sized shadows, some gibbering on the walls, others moving freely through the air, leaving trails of darkness wherever they went.

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I was already responsible for keeping an eye on Janey, so it stood to reason that I also become responsible for keeping an eye on Bob. Why not? Give me two dangerous things for the price of one. And I didn't mind, not particularly. I'd lost everything anyway. After that, spending my few remaining days shepherding a madwoman and a brain-damaged human bomb was practically a walk in the park. La de da.

So I sat at the little writing desk that had once belonged to Sharon's daughter Katie, and I stroked my wife's hair, and I guarded Bob to make sure he didn't writhe free of his restraints, and I watched the shadows capering on the walls, and I didn't once think about what the others were doing until I heard the knock on the door.

That was unusual. We always kept the door in here slightly ajar. Bad things happened to people who locked themselves in. But then, since the Locusts, bad things happened no matter what we did... I grunted. "Come in."

Peter entered, his eyes bloodshot circles on a face entirely covered with golden fur. I admired his ability to cope; it couldn't have been easy for him to come in here, today, what with the distorted shadows of his four children doing somersaults on the mist-shrouded walls. I could barely stand being in here myself, and my kids hadn't changed shape nearly as much as his. His barely looked like children at all, I thought...

He was also carrying an axe. Ed's axe. Ed had kept in shape by chopping his own firewood. It didn't occur to me to wonder what Peter would be doing with it.

He spoke in the hesitant tones of a man unaccustomed to speech. "We looked all around the house, even in the attic and basement. There's no sign of Sharon."

"Thank you," I said, thinking that I didn't exactly trust Nancy to lead a motivated search. "How are you holding up?"

He gazed at the wall, where the silhouette of a hulking, ogre-shaped thing grabbed and ate the silhouette of something resembling a snake. "It's funny," he said, in a voice so far away I knew he didn't really register what he saw. "The way the human mind works. The way this...insanity...has affected me. If Claudette had died a week ago I might have...I think I would have...gone insane. I loved her, you know."

"I know." They'd been the neighborhood's perpetual honeymooners; unlike me and Jane, or Sharon and Eddie, or anybody else on the street, they'd

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always seemed perfect together, joined in the way marriage was advertised to work in the storybooks. They always been so overly cuddly-kissy that the rest of us had openly mocked them for it, while secretly envying them what they had. "I'm sorry, Pete."

He stared at the axe, as if trying to lose himself in its reassuring solidity. "I should be crazy with grief. But I feel...nothing. Like none of this is real. Like I'm a million miles away from myself, and all of this is just...something I made up; like all I have to do is focus my eyes the right way and there won't be any Locusts and the whole world will be back the way it's supposed to be. But then I look in the mirror, and I see what I'm becoming, and...I realize it's never going to end...and I can't even find a reason to care. What's wrong with me, Stu?"

It was a blatant plea for sympathy, and I was the wrong person to ask. Between Jane and Sharon and my children and the bubbling sensation in my hands, I was so wrapped up in my own problems that I shouldn't have had any room to comfort anybody else. But he needed somebody, and there was nobody else available, so I stood up, intent on doing what I could.

I was halfway across the room when he emitted a sound that was half-gasp, half-howl...

...and buried the axe deep in my chest.

I registered the look in his eyes before I registered the impact. It was half-horror, half-release. The release meant he'd been steeling himself for the blow and hadn't been sure he was able to go through with it. The horror meant he still wasn't sure.

There was no pain. No blood, either. I didn't have time to wonder why. Shock alone made me stagger back, away from him, and his eyes, and the blade buried in my heart. I managed only three steps — followed by Peter, who wouldn't or couldn't let go of the axe handle, and was pulled along like a dog being dragged by its leash — before I tripped on Bob and began to fall.

I didn't want to fall. It seemed important, somehow, that I not fall. But there was only one solid object in reach.

My fingers closed around the axe handle, pulling it and Peter down with me as I fell. He released it and hit the floor beside me with a loud gasp. I didn't notice when I landed. I just stared at the strange foreign pole rising from my chest...and at my own hands, knotting and boiling as they gripped the polished wood. The flesh there was churning like the ocean during a tropical storm, complete miniature tsunamis rippling my arms in waves.

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Peter scrambled away. "Oh God," he wailed. "I'm sorry, Stu, I didn't mean it, I didn't even think what I was doing..."

I pulled the axe from my chest. The blade emerged clean and dry. I tossed it to one side and ran boiling fingers over a smooth, unmarked chest, which felt too much like molten steel and too little like human skin.

Somehow, that was much worse than any wound could have possibly been...

"...but she told me to get it, that it was our only chance to survive, and I said I couldn't, and she said I had to, she couldn't do it herself, you wouldn't let us anywhere near him..."

He went on like that for a while, about how it was all Nancy's idea, how he must have been half-crazy himself to listen to her, and how he was sorry, oh God, he was so sorry. I was beyond caring. It was too much easier to just lie here, flat on my back, as if I was really wounded, and not deal with the insane sucker-punches that came ten a day in the world after the Locusts. Jane crawled out the door, her whiny nonsense babble punctuating the clicks of the fangs in her eye sockets; I did nothing. Bob woke up and shrieked in sudden agony, the blanket wrapped around his transformed arm swelling like a balloon as another burst of deadly light exploded from the changestone at its tip; I did nothing. Peter backed against the wall trying to get away from me; the dark childlike shapes drifting across the plaster suddenly changed direction and went for him, wrapping him in tentacles of shadow...and I did nothing. I didn't even react when the shadows curled around my own skin and I realized they were going after both of us. There was simply no goddamn point.

The children slipped off the walls, silent and gray and undefined, less like ghosts than random patterns of light and shadow. There were more of them than there should have been, as if they'd been multiplying in the places they now inhabited; and as they converged on me and Peter, they whispered foul things in words from no human language. About all I got from it was that they were cold and afraid and they hated what they'd become.

Peter was still sobbing as the shadows engulfed him.

My daughter Rachel whispered: *Are you scared, Daddy?*

I was. God help us all, I was.

And the last thing I heard before I lost consciousness was the fluttering of little wings.

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6.

We'd been discussing the Locusts, and where they'd come from; arguing about whether they were aliens, or angels, or creatures that had yet to be named; and Eddie had taken the position that they'd always existed, at the edges of Man's civilization, their numbers acceptably low until now.

"There must have been a predator," Eddie said.

It was early in the plague. Before we lost our children, before we sought common refuge in Eddie and Sharon's house. Ten of us were on a foraging expedition to the local supermarket. We were just beginning to run out of food, then; we hadn't yet suffered the evil miracle that forced us to find an alternative to food; and we only risked the trip — three whole blocks — because we still thought the only alternative was starving to death. That's when we were still acting like survivalists, carrying hunting rifles we actually believed would make a difference.

(Yeah. Right. We got to the supermarket, and came back empty-handed. Only now there were five of us instead of ten...the other five seized by the ravenous things that had once been wrapped in plastic among the frozen meats. The hunting rifles had been useless against them. It would be the last time we'd ever venture any real distance from the house. But that day, on our way to be massacred, we still had faith in our own ability that the world would be fair to us. And when Eddie talked, we listened; after all, he always knew what he was talking about.)

"What kind of predator?" asked Claudette.

"I don't know. Something that kept their populations down, prevented them from overrunning their environment, kept them from becoming...Lemmings?...no. Locusts." His lips smacked around the word; it was the first time he'd called them that, and for everybody in earshot it sounded like an official christening. "Whatever it was, it's not around anymore. We must have done something to kill it off...or at least bring its population down so low that it can't effectively make a difference anymore."

As everybody chewed on that, I said, "If you're right, and that's the explanation, we're in trouble."

Eddie glanced at me, openly surprised I'd dared to speak in his presence; ever since that thing with Sharon, we'd tended to stay out of each other's way. "Why?"

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"First law of wildlife management," I said. "Whenever the prey gets too numerous, the predators multiply faster to compensate. If the old predators are gone, then new ones evolve. Either way, we're going to have to worry about them next...and they're going to be worse."

Everybody looked at each other. All of a sudden, nobody wanted to think about the predators anymore. The Locusts were bad enough. They were already utterly destroying the world we'd known, turning it into something frightening and alien, in which we might not have a place...if there was something worse on the horizon, we might as well just place the barrels of our rifles in our mouths, pull the triggers, and be done with it. It would save us all a hell of a lot of wasted effort...

...but we wouldn't know for sure until it happened.

And so we turned away from conversation and just concentrated in making our way through streets littered with tiny humanoid corpses. Nobody said anything else until we reached the shopping center where the supermarket stood waiting for us.

And where five of us then died...

7.

WHEREVER WE WERE, it was dark. A strange kind of darkness, signifying not only the absence of light, but also the addition of something deeper and colder.

Peter was in here with me — and he was screaming, loudly and continuously, with more air than could realistically be held by a single pair of lungs — but he was a thousand miles away, too far away to reach; he'd sunken into the darkness a lot faster than I. The neighborhood children surrounded both of us, jeering with voices that cut like barbed steel, in sentences that stung like salt poured directly into an open wound. They were delighted to have adults in here with them, where they could have all sorts of fun torturing us with the force of their combined hate.

I didn't mind. I was relieved. It was over. I didn't have to spend any more nights listening to the Locusts pound the walls, and wonder which of my friends would still be alive the next time the sun set. I didn't have to spend any more days watching our humanity recede from us one mutation at a time. I was only in hell...and if it was a hell that could give the children some

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satisfaction, then so much the better. I was sick of fighting.

Somewhere, much farther away, somebody shouted my name.

It was some woman's voice: cold, distant, and distorted, like words spoken underwater. I knew her from somewhere, but didn't care enough to figure out where. Let somebody else answer her. I'd lost.

Stu! she cried again, insistently.

Leave me alone, I thought.

Stu! Dammit! Come out of there! If not for me, then for Jane!

"Jane?"

I thought of the woman I'd married, whom I once thought I'd loved, whom I'd considered beautiful until the silence started to rise between us; picturing her in her wedding dress, elegant as she'd been that day, but wearing the freakish face she wore now.

I preferred the darkness.

Stu! She's in trouble!

That voice really did sound familiar...

I waved my hands before me. They were flaming red things that trailed streaks of incandescent light. They were translucent, too; if I looked close, I could see the skeleton beneath the skin...a skeleton that had changed in troublesome ways, with bumps and protrusions that failed to match the shape of my fingers.

Why bother?

Stu!

A thousand miles away, my fingers brushed against something solid: a wooden floor.

That's it, Stu! Come on!

The darkness clutched at me with childlike fingers. I reached for the floor ahead of me, and crawled toward the light. Wherever I touched it, the wood charred.

Oh, thank God...I thought I'd lost you...

I recognized the landscape forming around me: the Children's Room. It was a place filled with shadows, but still one blindingly bright compared to the one I now strove to escape. There was a crumpled, bloody figure lying in a heap on a floor — clearly a corpse, but I couldn't tell whose.

I also recognized the voice egging me on: "Sharon?"

It was like that was the magic word. The room clicked into existence, like a picture suddenly given the proper focus. I gasped as a million red hot

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pins and needles jabbed at my unaccountably naked legs, then looked behind me, and saw the abyss I'd just escaped: an indistinct, shadowy something that throbbed in the place where Sharon's children had once kept their toy chest. It was universes deep, that darkness...and I couldn't imagine how I'd found my way out, even with Sharon's help.

Sharon.

She was alive...!

The thought made me leap to my feet. "Sharon!

This time she didn't answer. I whirled around in circles, searching every corner of the room, barely even noticing the dead body as I shook with frustration at not being able to find her. Other realizations came more slowly. I registered only that I was completely naked; that the boiling effect had spread from my hands to every inch of my exposed skin; that hot air rose from me like steam.

Then, and only then, did I note that poor, brain-fried, bad-luck Bob had been murdered. His wide-open eyes, which stared at the cracked ceiling in awed incomprehension, were the only parts of his face that remained recognizable; everything below that had been turned to raw meat by repeated blows from same axe Peter had used on me. The axe itself still stood imbedded in the floor beside the place where the arm had been violently amputated at the elbow. The blood pooled around the stump still bubbled with bursts of arcane light; beautiful in its own way, but still impossible in ways that hurt my eyes to look at.

My eyes watered. I'd never known Bob sane, and his life before the plague remained entirely a mystery to me...but I was sure he'd been a good man once, who may have had a family somewhere, and probably would have tried to return to them, had he been capable of remembering them at all. He didn't deserve anything that had happened to him. Then again, none of us did. Not even Nancy...

I remembered Peter saying that his attack on me had been Nancy's idea. He said that he would have had to kill me to get It.

What It was he talking about?

Then I realized...and if I'd ever imagined myself so anaesthetized by the daily horrors of life under the Locusts that nothing could ever make my heart race again, I now discovered that I was wrong.

The changestone. That's what she'd sent Peter after; what Peter would have had to kill me to take.

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She'd killed Bob to amputate the changestone.

Panicky, I yelled "SHARON!"

Something behind me rustled: a sound as insubstantial as a slip of paper slipping off a desktop and onto the floor.

"Stu," she whispered.

I whirled, desperate to see her face...

...and was utterly unsurprised to find her gone...a fading rainbow trail the only sign that anybody had been here at all.

8.

Nancy and Jane weren't anywhere I looked, not even in the basement, though we were fast approaching the time of day when nobody would be safe anywhere else. I went outside to look for them, and stood miserably under the twilit sky, paralyzed by rage and worry, unable to think of anything except the rainbow trails just starting to appear over the sea of battered rooftops, until I happened to glance down the street and register that the door of Nancy's house was wide open for the first time since the beginning of the siege.

An invitation.

The first Locust of the night went for me just as I set foot on Nancy's driveway. She was the fastest one I'd ever seen, and she went right for my face, the rainbow trail igniting from heat-friction behind her. Just as she seemed about to drill a hole right through my forehead I caught a glimpse of the expression on an angelic tomboy face painted in bright cartoony colors and distinguished by a pair of astonishingly beautiful blue eyes: realization. I'd never seen the look on a Locust before. She could have sliced right into me, but she veered off with six inches to spare. I turned to see where she'd gone, saw her rainbow trail receding toward the sky in a straight line. First Star on the Left, Straight On Till Morning.

"I'll be damned," I said. Then cursed myself for my choice of words. It was probably true, after all.

Two more went for me before I made it to Nancy's front door; they also changed their minds at the last second. Interesting, but absolutely no guarantee I'd be safe when they started falling by the millions.

I went in. I'd only been inside her house once before, seven years earlier, when Jane and I had first moved into the neighborhood and were still

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discounting all the warnings to stay away from Nancy as idle gossip. After all, just because everybody said she was crazy didn't mean she really was, right? Maybe she was just a poor divorced woman who'd had the colossal misfortune to rub some people the wrong way and get unfairly pegged the neighborhood crank. So what? We were new people, forming our impressions from scratch.

Two hours later, we'd left wondering, *Jeez, what the hell is that woman's problem?*

From the looks of things, the place hadn't changed much since then. It was still a nightmarish mishmash of shiny silver wallpaper, black leather upholstery, mahogany elephants, and silkscreen prints of random geometric shapes in triangular metallic frames. As before, all the seat cushions were preserved in plastic, as a bequest to hapless future generations. The only difference now was that all of it was a shambles: the furniture had been piled up near the broken windows, and the walls were spotted with the impact craters left by crashing Locusts. It looked like the aftermath of a war, and I supposed it was, since back when the Plague first struck, she'd spent four whole days defending the place alone before finally agreeing to join the rest of us defending Sharon and Eddie's. Too late, I realized that she'd showed more guts than any of us...

Before I decided where to look first, I heard a half-dozen thumps on the roof. More kamikaze Locusts, giving their all for gravity. They'd be swarming through the windows soon. Reason to hurry.

I found what was left of Nancy down a flight of stone steps, in a basement brightly lit from the glow of her skin.

It was almost funny. I understood why the changestone had been an irresistable temptation for her; it was ultimate power, after all. You just waved it, and caused miracles wherever you happened to point. But if I'd learned anything from life after the Locusts, it was that life with too many miracles is just another form of chaos.

That chaos had eaten Nancy alive.

She was in there somewhere, I supposed. She had to be; a shapeless impossible thing, not an arm or a tentacle or any kind of limb but something else, was still threatening me with the changestone. But nothing else about her was recognizable; everything changed constantly, with every additional puff of glowing dust that landed on the billowing liquid mass that had once

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been her skin. Every few seconds, a recognizable feature drifted to the surface — an arm, or a mouth, or a complete face — before breaking up, drifting apart, and sinking once again. The face was too distorted to be easily identifiable as human, let alone Nancy; but from the way it grimaced, with every fresh transformation, it was clearly in agony. And every time it writhed, the protrusion that held the changestone trembled violently, releasing fresh sparkling energy with every twitch; most of which landed on whatever Nancy had become, instantly changing some small piece of her to something worse. I wondered how long it had taken her to totally lose control of what she had. An hour, maybe? Two? Had she turned into this the second she picked up the changestone, and somehow made it home anyway?

Upstairs, the sound of Locusts striking the house became a steadily increasing drumbeat; and for the first time since the Plague began I thought I could hear a chorus of their little screams.

It wouldn't be long before one found its way in here...

I took a step closer. The changestone flared. A beam of glowing red light speared me in the chest, drilling a hole the size of a basketball through my ribs. The cement wall behind me crumbled into dust where the beam had exited my back. I stood there, waiting for death to claim me. Then I realized I was still alive, looked down and saw the steaming flesh of my chest spread out to patch the wound.

Only the shock made me weak. I fell to my knees, and muttered, "You shouldn't have done it, Nancy."

Her voice rumbled, shaking the walls. "Do what?"

"Taken the changestone. You shouldn't have taken the changestone."

Her laugh was like an entire mountain range crumbling to dust. "I had to. Somebody had to take control."

"You call this control? Come on! Look at yourself!"

The shapeless mass breathed in and out, its hot breath billowing wetly against the walls. What it produced next could have been a sob. "My husband was a real bastard, Stu."

I stirred. "What?"

"My husband. Francis. You never met him, did you? He died a long time ago, before you moved in. He was a real bastard. One of the worst. He used to knock me around all the time. He finally left the day I broke his ribs." The rumble took on a satisfied, chop-licking tone: "I'm glad he's dead. I'm glad they're all dead."

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Somewhere nearby, glass shattered. That was a shock. I didn't see how there could be any unbroken windows left, anywhere in the known world. I stood up — aware that parts of me were starting to glow with little wisps of flame — listened to the distant patter of little flying things crashing against the walls just upstairs, and said, "Nancy...where's my wife?"

"Around." Her skin grew spikes, became smooth like glass, then developed facets, like a polished diamond. "You can't be killed, Stu. Did you know that? That should make you happy. From this moment on, even magic can't touch you anymore. You can go wherever you want, do whatever you want, eat whatever you want, fuck whatever you want; you'll always be the same age, and you'll always be what you are now. You hit the jackpot, Stu. You're the Superman of the new millennium. I envy you that."

Invulnerability in the world after the Locusts wasn't a gift I wanted any part of. I said, "Jane. Where's Jane?"

Astonishingly enough, she giggled — a sound I wouldn't have expected to hear from her in a lifetime. "The first thing I wished for was omniscience. I know anything I want to know, now — I just have to concentrate on knowing it, and the answer comes to me. I know how many people are still alive, and how many would be better off dead. I know that Japan is covered by a free-standing pillar of salt water three miles high. I know that there's one city in Europe — Brussells, if you care — where the Locusts don't fall at all, but where the people are starving to death, and killing each other for food. I know that there's a small town over in Iowa where all the people are rooted to the ground like plants, and helpless to stop Locusts from nibbling little pieces of their flesh at night. And I know that the worst is still coming — that the Plague set to arrive in just about one year will make this one look like a holiday. And the Plague that arrives a year after that — well, Stu, my old friend, let's just say I'm glad I'll probably be dead by then. I wouldn't enjoy that one at all. It's too bad for you that you'll still be alive, to see what I'm talking about..."

I had no doubt that all of it was true; if I permitted myself to think about what it meant, I'd lose whatever sanity I had left. The words burst from me in a scream: "Where's Jane, dammit?"

The jellylike thing contracted once, then turned inside out, and seemed to boil. When a mouth drifted to the surface, it was smiling. "She's upstairs. In my bedroom. I did something nice for her. If you want, you can go visit...I've made the floors conveniently fireproof for you."

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Upstairs.

Where the thumpthumpthump of their tiny forms impacting against the walls of Nancy's house was fast becoming the only sound in the entire universe.

I whirled and ran for the stairs...only to be frozen by a final anguished shriek. "STU!"

Almost against my will, I turned, to face her again...and saw that the chaos had sprouted a new face, this one an eight-year-old girl recognizable as the child she'd once been. The girl wasn't exactly cute (she was a little too plain for that), but neither was she burdened by the pinched, constipated look that adults like Nancy permanently stamp on their faces with years of anger and bitterness and self-hatred. She was somebody who could have been saved from that, had she been reached early enough...instead of left alone to eventually live the worst possible life she could.

The self-portrait struck me as hard as anything the Locusts had ever done to us.

The little girl started to cry. "Nobody...ever liked me, Stu...nobody. Not my parents...or my husband...or the people I worked with...or my neighbors...nobody. None of them...ever really...liked me. Do you know how terrible that is...to live your whole life...without anybody in the world ever giving a shit whether you live or die?"

The house was vibrating with the hum of little wings. The Locusts must have been swarming everywhere, by then: lining the walls like maggots on roadkill, turning the air itself as thick as syrup.

"S-stu?" the little girl pleaded.

I said, "Live with it," and abandoned her.

9.

THE LOCUSTS THEMSELVES were easy. Like Nancy said, there was nothing they could do to hurt me; I just walked uncaring into the mad, swarming cloud and let the little bastards sizzle and burn wherever they touched me. Some lived for quite a while, fused to my skin and unable to pull themselves away; their little blackened bodies writhing and convulsing all along my arms and shoulders. When I was halfway up the stairs to the second

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floor, two who must have imagined themselves self-sacrificing heroes went for my eyes; they burst into flame before they got anywhere near me and only succeeded in dusting me with cremation ash.

By the time I was halfway up the stairs to the second floor, the swarm was so dense that the air was liquid with them. They formed a ball with me at its center, trying to smother my fire beneath the combined weight of their skin. It didn't work. I just marched onward, incinerating hundreds with every step, trailing as much flesh-flavored smoke as a firebombed city.

Just before I found Nancy's bedroom, Sharon spoke to me from somewhere just behind my right ear: *You won't be able to save her, Stu.*

I whirled but didn't find her.

I'm sorry. But it's true. You won't be able to save her, any more than you were able to save me. But you'll be able to save the Others.

"WHAT OTHERS, DAMMIT!? WE'RE THE LAST TWO LEFT!"

She's not going to make it, Stu. She's not built for it.

I fled through a burning wall of Locusts, made splinters of the wall to Nancy's bedroom, and found out what she meant.

Jane lay on the bed, above the covers, in a ruffled pink nightgown. It wasn't one of hers; she would have considered it ridiculous. It must have been Nancy's.

She was asleep. The Locusts with her weren't disturbing her at all. There were uncounted thousands of them, all beautiful, all terrible, turning the furniture into shapeless mounds, and lining the walls like living coats of paint...and though they surrounded her on all sides, they left her alone and unhurt, for once preferring a passive role as spectators. There were no fading rainbow-trails anywhere; they'd been motionlessly awaiting this moment for a long time.

Thousands of big moist eyes followed my progress to the foot of her bed. When I stopped and looked down at her, some of the Locusts chittered to each other, like noisy patrons in a movie theatre. I wondered if they even understood what they were seeing, then wondered, with equal bleakness, if I did.

Nancy had done a nice thing for her, all right.

Something that almost seemed a miracle, until I devoted two seconds to thinking about the intentions behind it.

She was Jane again.

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Nancy had corrected all the changes the Locusts had made in her. The fanged sockets were gone, replaced by standard-issue (albeit closed and sleeping) eyes, and a close approximation of normal ears. She seemed a full ten years younger; she slept beatifically, peacefully, contentedly, the way she had slept a long, long time ago, when we were young and in love and I was still capable of wanting to stare at her face as she slept. Once upon a time I'd been endlessly fascinated by that face. But the fascination had gradually melted away, taking the love with it...and reducing us to strangers sharing the same house.

Her half-smile testified to pleasant dreams. The kind only possible for someone who's never lived in a world transformed beyond all recognition by the Locusts. But I didn't need to see that to know that she'd remember nothing. Nancy would have taken care of that.

It was almost as nice as Nancy had advertised: one last night of peace in a world that had no peace left. Until I considered the kind of world Jane would face when she woke up.

I stood there, helpless, unable to decide whether to stay, leave, defend her, or kill her...until she took the decision from me, by rolling over, and murmuring the first intelligible word she'd uttered in weeks: "Stu?"

All around the room, the Locusts rustled their little diaphanous wings. Maybe they'd attack her now. Or maybe they'd wait for her to wake up. I wondered if it mattered, and decided that it didn't. Whatever happened, I'd never be able to stop them all, if they went for her.

I answered her in a voice like grinding stones: "Yes?"

"I...had a bad dream, Stu...it didn't make any sense..."

"I know. It's okay. Go back to sleep. You don't have to wake up yet."

Her eyebrows knit in a concerned frown. Groggy as she was, she obviously knew something was terribly wrong. In that moment, I fell in love with her all over again — the last, pointless, desperate love of a man faced with something he'd carelessly thrown away and would never ever be able to get back.

She rolled over. Opened her eyes. Saw for the very first time what I had become.

The Locusts didn't give her any time to react. They just launched themselves from all four walls and converged on her as she sat up in bed. I don't even think she saw them at all, even as the air around us turned black with them. In that instant, she saw nothing at all but me.

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I screamed, "GET DOWN!", and flipped the mattress, ejecting her from bed even as a hundred glittering rainbows sliced the air where she'd been. She cried out as she hit the hardwood floor. The mattress landed on edge behind her, instantly reduced to a thousand shreds of canvas-and-foam-rubber shrapnel as a squadron of tiny figures approaching from the other side punched right through, the white stuffing flapping from their little bodies like streamers. They emerged flying low over Jane, slicing deep furrows in her arms and legs. Locusts pelted me from all sides as I ran around the end of the bed, just in time to see her scramble for shelter underneath.

Then the room went bright with criss-crossing rainbow-trails: millions of them, each written over the others, like fingerpainting done by God.

None of them hurt me. Like Nancy said, they couldn't.

But wherever Jane was, behind all that, I could do nothing more to help her. All I could do was stand there and burn.

10.

Jane was gone when morning burned the Locusts away. I found the nightgown shredded to confetti beneath what was left of the bed. Some of the shreds were sticky with her blood. Some weren't. There was no body at all. Common sense told me she was dead, and that the Locusts simply hadn't left anything for me to find; my heart told me she'd escaped, though it's beyond me where she could have gone. It doesn't matter. I think she escaped, and I think she found other survivors, and I think she found contentment of a kind among them, and even if none of that's true, then it still remains a good thought to warm me, in the lonely places where I now walk.

The Plagues Nancy foretold did come eventually, scouring what was left of the earth like armies of flame; and they were, as she advertised, worse than anything the Locusts had brought us, though not nearly as bad as the Plagues that arrived next. There are still a few scattered people left clinging to life here and there, though they don't much resemble people anymore, and truth to tell, I'm not quite sure they're worth calling human. They have nothing much to say to me, and I have nothing much to say to them. We get along as well as anything does.

Sharon's still around. She still speaks to me, sometimes, her voice tantalizingly close; she refuses to tell me, if she even could, where she's gone

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or what she's become. Sometimes she tells me I have a destiny, but she has never explained what she means. Every once in a while she laughs as if at a joke only she knows. When she does, I wish I could cry, because then she sounds most like the Sharon I loved; the rest of the time, she's like an echo of an echo, or a multiple-generation copy of a recording, more a reminder of Sharon than Sharon herself. I've never caught a single glimpse of what she's become. But she's still the closest thing I have to a friend. Maybe the closest thing anybody has to a friend. And these days, the closest anybody ever gets to happily ever after.

It doesn't stop me from being lonely. But maybe that's the point.

Locusts continue to fall, and I continue to feed on them, but they're not all that important, anymore; they're just another detail of a world that continues to change beyond all recognition. Mountain ranges have become sharp teeth floating on boiling horizons. Pain is a sentient ocean, death a liquid memory. Icicles sing fire and angels turn to stone. Changedoors slip sideways along the fading slaves of gravity. I've stopped trying to understand what I see. I'm the only constant, the only immortal, and though I walk through this place untouched and unharmed, I still can't fit each day's fresh plunge into nightmare into a mind capable of remembering the lost world of cable TV, nuclear weapons, shopping malls and AIDS. Sometimes I simply go mad, but even that's no escape, since there's no form of insanity so extreme that the rampant madness of the new world cannot exceed it and render me sane again by comparison.

Sharon whispers to me at night. She says I have much to do. She says that the others are depending on me.

I hope so. It would be nice to think I still had a purpose in this life. I haven't believed that for a long, long time.

I only know this: that when I fall asleep on my bed of dancing time, I can only face the mingling concentric cubes of sky and hope they stay in place for a while yet...because I like them, and I know from experience that this means I won't like whatever comes to take their place.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

March will come in like a lion here at *F&SF*. We have a lot of adventure stories for you next month, and they hold a few surprises, all pleasurable (at least in our opinion).

Harlan Ellison returns to our pages with "Midnight in the Sunken Cathedral." Artist **Barclay Shaw** illustrated this beautiful story about the loss, the sea, and her mysteries, providing us with one of the most unusual covers we've ever had.

Bruce Sterling's newest Leggy Starlitz story is grim, frightening—and very very funny. Bruce weaves a tale of terrorism and children's book writers, of assassinations and Baltic spies, so ludicrous as to be the stuff of today's headlines even if Bruce does claim that the story is near-future science fiction.

Finally, New York Times bestselling writer **Dave Wolverton** brings us an adventure story in the manner of Jack London by way of H. G. Wells. In honor of the hundredth anniversary of the publication of *War of the Worlds*, Dave has written a continuation of the Martian invasion. Only the ships didn't just land in Europe. They also landed in Alaska, land of heroic dogs and horrifying men. And in the lyrical language of his mentors, Dave gives us a version of the cock fight that you will never, ever forget.

Future issues will have covers by **Bob Eggleton**, **Jill Bauman**, and **Ron Walotsky**. They illustrate stories by **Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Sheila Finch**, and **Carolyn Ives Gilman**. **Kathi Maio** will return with some thoughtful insights on films, **Gregory Benford** will show us the interesting side to science, and **Michelle West** will begin her occasional column, "Guilty Pleasures." So, keep your subscription current. The science fiction and fantasy magazine that won the most short fiction awards in 1995 is charging headlong into 1996.

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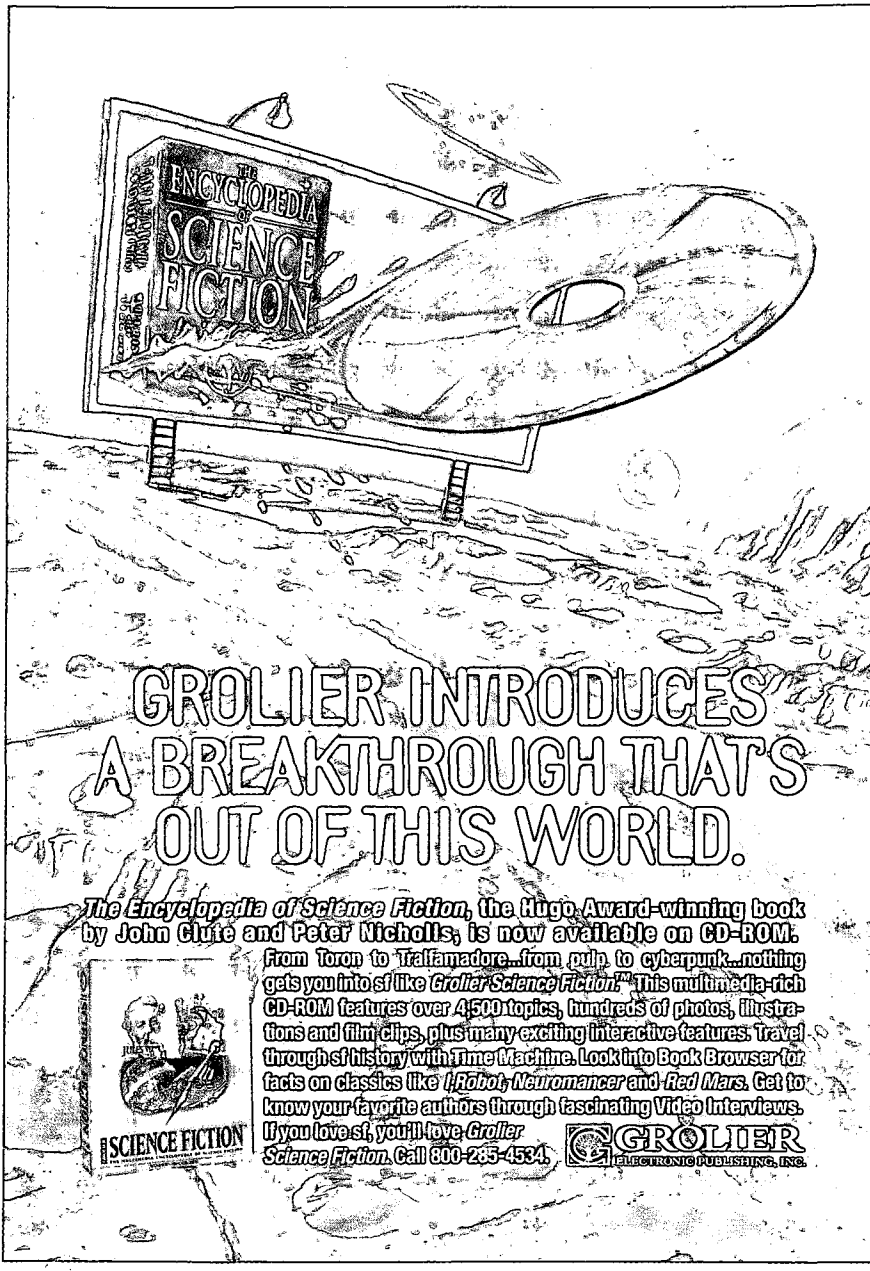

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